



CROSSINGS

by Alex Landragin

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A Conversation with Alex Landragin

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I was born in the heart of France's Champagne region into a family that has been making champagne in the same *grand cru* village for centuries. The other, maternal, side of the family is Armenian, from a family that has been migrating for centuries. My mother grew up in Odessa. When I was a child, my parents moved to Australia, then later to America. I still often wish French was my literary language. I declared I wanted to be a writer to my family when I was ten years old, but I didn't really start this calling seriously until I was sixteen, and then only as an act of parental rebellion. I've thought of myself as a writer ever since.

Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer?

Above all, I'm a writer and reader of the literature of exile. When I was sixteen, it was Camus's *The Stranger*, Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Later, Nabokov, Perec, Sebald, and Bernhard. In my midthirties, I found myself living for a time in the central Australian desert, working with an indigenous community. On a trip to New York, I visited McNally Jackson Books and bought Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*. Back home, I read it over two euphoric weeks. It reminded me that there is nothing more important (but paradoxically also nothing more futile) than literature. It inspired me to go back to writing full time.



How did you become a writer? Would you care to share any writing tips?

It's hard to give tips because luck is essential. Soon after I left university, I broke into the travel guide publishing boom with a stroke of luck. I spent most of my thirties writing for Lonely Planet. I authored travel guides in Europe, Australia and Africa.

Throughout this time, I wrote and read widely, I kept diaries and notebooks, I blogged and wrote copious poems, songs, stories, novellas, almost all of which were worthless. I played keyboard in obscure indie bands and piano-accordion in an even obscurer klezmer band. I was always on the move. All that time, even when I wasn't writing, I was practicing to be a writer. I didn't stumble upon my subject matter until late, and then only by accident.

What was the inspiration for this novel?

When I was in my first year of university, I took a class in creative writing. One morning the teacher, a poet, told us about a story he'd just read. It was about an island whose inhabitants could move from one body to another. One day, a European ship stops at the island, and by the time the ship sails away it's impossible to say who's gone and who's stayed behind. I was blown away by this brief summary of an unknown story. I was convinced it was the story I was born to write. But someone else had thought of it, so by all rights I couldn't do anything with it. I got on with my life, convinced that my story had been rightfully claimed by someone else. At a party several years

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later, someone read my palm. He said I'd only find success by going back to something that had happened in my late teens.

Fast forward two decades. Still a writer in search of my subject matter and with my fortieth birthday nearing, I started writing a blog, intending to write and publish a story every weekday for a year. This period was marked by two personal tragedies, a suicide close to me and a motorcycle accident. I kept writing the blog throughout this period. It became my lifeline.

By story 151, I was so short of ideas, I revisited that story from my university days, writing my own version of it, adding a note at the end explaining that the idea wasn't original. The next day, I realized that the end of that story, when the ship sails away from the island, is the beginning of a much bigger and more interesting story—a novel. Other than the dual reading sequences, which came much later, everything fell into place quickly: the beginning, the middle, the end, the title, two possible sequels. I decided there and then to write that novel, in what is now the baroness sequence. Finally I had my subject matter. I ended the blog prematurely and set out on what would become the greatest adventure of my life, one that would last six years and take me on a quest from Melbourne to Paris to London to Charlottesville to New Orleans and finally to Los Angeles.

Incidentally, I once had the chance to ask the teacher-poet about that story he'd told us about years earlier. He told me that he had no recollection of it at all. It had completely slipped his mind. But its presence is felt in the novel from the opening line: "I didn't write this book. I stole it."



Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel? Do you have firsthand experience with its subject? Did you base any of the characters on people from your own life? What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell your story?

In Timbuktu, site of an ancient, recently pillaged library, there is a proverb: “Every book has a thousand authors.” It is truer of *Crossings* than most. *Crossings* is a historical novel set over 150 years in settings that range from a Pacific island to a merchant sailing ship to a Louisiana plantation to Paris. Some of the settings recur at different moments of their histories, and some of the characters are based on real people. Of the six years it took to write the book, I spent almost an entire year getting lost in the labyrinths of Paris’s libraries, old and new. I explored other great nineteenth-century collections in London, Charlottesville, and New Orleans. I toted my own backpack-sized book collection from city to city, including Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* and Benjamin’s *Illuminations* and *Arcades Project*.

Are you currently working on another book? And if so, can you tell us what it’s about?

From the very beginning, *Crossings* was always intended to be a trilogy, albeit one that would break all the rules of trilogies. But I’ve also got other interesting ideas in gestation.

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How a chance discovery in a Parisian cemetery brought fiction and reality together

It was a cool, gray spring day in Paris. I was standing in the Montparnasse Cemetery in front of the grave of the Romantic poet Charles Baudelaire, still a shrine to his many fans, who leave offerings of flowers, poems, and Metro tickets. I had pieces of a novel, which I'd already titled *Crossings*, laid out in my head, and Baudelaire—or Charles as I'd come to call him—played a crucial part in it. But I didn't know how to bring the pieces together. I'd come here hoping to find the solution.

Crossings is an amalgam of two stories that were bouncing around in my head a few years before this. One was the story of the final days of the German writer Walter Benjamin, who died escaping Nazi persecution at the beginning of 1940, carrying an unpublished work that subsequently disappeared. The second was a fictional tale I'd been told by a teacher more than two decades earlier about an island whose inhabitants can swap bodies. When a European ship that has chanced upon the island sails away, it's unclear who has left and who has stayed behind. That simple tale haunted me for decades as the story I wished I had written. One blessed morning I had the insight that I could write a novel about what happened next—the story of the islanders who'd “stowed away” in the bodies of European sailors. I also realized that if I combined the two stories, I could create an intricate and compelling hybrid story, using the conceit of “crossing” to explore some of Walter Benjamin's key concepts.



But how was I going to fit these two stories together? The obvious answer was Charles Baudelaire and his lover and muse, the beautiful and enigmatic Jeanne Duval, who was a woman of color of unknown origins. I knew Walter Benjamin had been fascinated by Baudelaire and the mid-nineteenth century almost to the point of obsession. So I had three pieces of a puzzle spread out across time and space that needed a thread to combine them. Having never written a historical novel, I knew there would be no shortcuts writing this one. To find it I needed to move to Paris.

Cut to that spring day in front of Charles's grave. Standing there, I felt closer to the troubled poet than I did reading his poems and biographies. But I was no closer to finding the elusive thread that would knit together the disparate pieces of my yet-to-be-written novel. I began exploring the cemetery. I knew the far southeast patch of the graveyard was historically reserved for Jewish families, and because Walter Benjamin himself was Jewish I thought it might be instructive to see it for myself. I was about halfway there, not far beyond the grave of one of my idols, Serge Gainsbourg, when out of the corner of my eye I saw something that brought me to a sudden, stunned stop. I was standing before a plinth of gray-and-pink mottled marble with an unusual inscription. It was not a family crypt, as most of the plots are in that cemetery, but an institutional one. The institution's name was La Société Baudelaire. Under these gilded words were the names of several people who'd been associated with it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their family names were unrelated. These were people bound not by

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blood but by love of poetry. My kind of people. My heart started beating faster—was this the thread I'd been looking for?

That night, in front of my laptop, I searched for *Société Baudelaire*. I discovered a website that appeared to have been designed soon after the birth of the internet. It described a literary society with origins in the nineteenth century, when joining societies, clubs, and salons was considered the height of sophistication. It had since fallen on leaner times, but the Société Baudelaire had once been frequented by larger-than-life personalities like fashion designer Coco Chanel.

I knew there and then that I had found what I had gone to the cemetery to seek out. Of course, there was still a lot of work to do, countless hours to spend in the gigantic bunker that is the Bibliothèque nationale de France, as well as half a dozen other libraries in Paris, London, Charlottesville, and New Orleans. But from that moment in the cemetery, it felt like I wasn't writing a novel so much as following a pre-existing trail of breadcrumbs. I inserted many of my fluke discoveries into the novel unchanged. I even gave Coco Chanel a glamorously villainous cameo. Finally, I had my thread.



Recommended Reading

This is a partial list of the books that inspired and influenced *Crossings* in the six years of its creation.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Crossings takes up the conceit of my favorite Virginia Woolf novel, extends it, and extrapolates from it. *Orlando* is a ground-breaking and underrated work of baroque imagination that prefigures much literature that followed it, from fantasy to magical realism.

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

Mitchell's influence on *Crossings* is formal and thematic. His intertextual and cross-generic games are virtuosic, and his fascination with varieties of metamorphosis, textual and existential, is a theme *Crossings* takes up, albeit perhaps with less subtlety.

Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*

The idea to separate *Crossings* into two reading sequences came late in its development, but it was inspired by Cortázar's landmark novel of the sixties, also set largely in Paris and also narrated by an intellectual man about his affair with a mysterious and elusive lover. *Hopscotch* asks readers to choose between reading a short novel (part one of the book), or a longer version of that story by hopping around between parts one and two. I wanted to take the concept to the next level and do something never done before, to my knowledge: ask readers to choose one of two completely different ways to read the same novel. Same book, but completely different beginnings, middles, and ends.

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**Attila József, "The Seventh" in *The Rattle Bag*
(Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, eds)**

I'm so glad I was able to include the first line of my favorite poem as the epigraph to my first novel. It's worth hunting down on the web. Written by a troubled Hungarian poet who died young in 1937, it's perhaps the wisest poem I've ever read and has helped me survive some difficult times. All Hungarians seem to know it or know of it. Its first stanza inspired the seven manifestations of Alula.

Wen-chin Ouyang (ed.), *The Arabian Nights*

I've loved folk tales and story cycles since I was a child, especially *The Arabian Nights*, perhaps thanks to my Armenian mother. One of the strangest and most enduring books in literature inspired the Scheherazade aspects of *Crossings*, especially the Russian doll structure, which runs, several times, seven dolls deep. I should also mention Marina Warner's insightful study of the Middle Eastern story cycle, *Stranger Magic*.

Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*

Baudelaire isn't one of my favorite writers. In many ways, he is dated, and anyway I was more interested in writing about Jeanne Duval. But his influence on subsequent literature, especially surrealism, was great, and Walter Benjamin in particular was practically obsessed with him. Scraps of Baudelaire's poetry and imagery are sprinkled throughout the novel (the translations are mine). Most of the non-Édmonde-related aspects of Baudelaire's circumstances in the book (the early travels, the dandyism, the poverty, Jeanne



Duval, the exile, the madness, the death) are taken from Joanna Richardson's 1994 biography. "The Education of a Monster" is the title of an unwritten story that Baudelaire wrote in a list of such titles in a notebook. The dinner-party rant is a rewriting of his late-career diatribe, "Poor Belgium!" In its madness, it prefigures later writers like Céline.

Angela Carter, *Black Venus*

The title story in this collection imagines a diminished and disillusioned Jeanne Duval, late in her life, after her golden age when, cast as a courtesan and muse, she loomed large in Parisian artistic and intellectual circles. Carter's depiction was the basis for my own. Duval was no less interesting a figure than Baudelaire, but where he reveals, she dissimulates. Someone should write a speculative biography of her, even though so little is known.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Like so many others, I have long been intrigued by the story of Walter Benjamin's lost manuscript, and *Crossings* is my fictional solution to the mystery. The entire novel is a kind of homage to Benjamin, and although I left much—perhaps too much—of his life at that time out of the novel, much is as it happened, particularly the final chapter in "City of Ghosts." Just about every essay in *Illuminations* has a presence in the novel, particularly "On the Concept of History," which was what Benjamin was actually writing in his final months. Alula in particular is a kind of fictionalized imagining of his angel of history. I was also inspired by his travel writings about Marseille, by *The Arcades Project*,

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and by *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, the Eiland and Jennings biography fortuitously published just as I began writing the book.

Jay Parini, *Benjamin's Crossing*

I'm not the first novelist to want to tell the tale of the death of Walter Benjamin. It's such a desperately unlucky story, and it has exercised the imagination of at least two other writers, not to mention the considerable nonfiction on the subject. As well as Parini's account of 1996, there's also the Italian writer Bruno Arpaia's 2006 imagining, *The Angel of History*.

Erich Maria Remarque, *Arch of Triumph*

Published in 1945, the second bestseller for the writer of *All Quiet on the Western Front* captures the lives of Central European émigrés in Paris as war with Germany inevitably approaches. I was seeking to reproduce some aftertaste of its bitterness in my depiction of pre-invasion Paris.

Georges Simenon, *Maigret*

I'm not a great reader of what the French call "railway station novels," but the middle section of *Crossings* is a parodic homage to *romans noirs* and *policiers*, especially those of the prolific and influential Simenon. Victor-Georges Massu, a senior detective in the Parisian police's homicide squad, was an inspiration for Maigret, Simenon's most enduring creation.

Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

This landmark 1926 surrealist prose-poem on the subject of a since-demolished Parisian arcade



(also known in English as *Nightwalker*) inspired Benjamin's monumental, unfinished *Arcades Project*. I wanted my pre-war Paris to have traces of *Paris Peasant's* surrealism, such as the upstairs arcade-brothel scene when the narrator is fleeing pursuers.

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

I once enjoyed the great indulgence of spending several weeks reading *Swann's Way* in the French original concurrently with C. K. Scott Moncrieff's English translation. The experience helped me write the Balthazar chapter. The list of clients Balthazar cites are all real-life people who inspired characters in *In Search of Lost Time*.

Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*

Edmund de Waal's genre-straddling family biography contains the most sumptuous descriptions of nineteenth-century interiors I have read. It was a sorely needed source of assistance when I came to my descriptions of period objects and rooms, particularly the description of the antique store at the end of "City of Ghosts."

Anna Seghers, *Transit*

For a brief period after June 1940, Marseille had a legitimate claim to be the world's most intellectually well-endowed city. Hundreds of Europe's antifascist artists and intellectuals gathered there in an often ill-fated attempt to escape the Nazis. Anna Seghers was one of them, and her account of that period, searing and unforgettable, is the base layer of my account of the Benjamin's final days there.

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Pat Barker, *Regeneration*

The war poems of Siegfried Sassoon made a pacifist of me as a youth. I devoured *Regeneration* when it was first published and borrowed from its setting—a WWI military psychiatric hospital (French in my case, not English)—for the penultimate chapter of the Alula section.

Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches*

The island's history, as related to Édmonde by the old man at the mission, is basically a history of the Marquesas Islands cribbed from Australian ethnohistorian Greg Dening's account. Even though the island I imagined is a made-up place, the history of the Marquesas seemed typical enough to me of colonized places to double as Oaeteetee's history—yet another theft, but like the others it was motivated by respect. I hope the indigenous Marquesan people won't mind. It's the section of the book I'm proudest of.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, *Typee*, and *Omoo*

While the character names are borrowed from various Polynesian languages, in every other respect Oaeteetee is a fictional place. Knowing I was on tricky ethical ground, I intentionally decided not to visit any Pacific islands while researching *Crossings*. Instead, I would base my depiction of Oaeteetee entirely (other than Greg Dening's historical account) from sources written in the late nineteenth century. Practically all I knew about sailing ships was from my reading of *Moby-Dick*, and Herman Melville's early travelogues about his adventures in the Pacific remain memorable



for their descriptions of islands, ships, islanders, and sailing life free of the period's ubiquitous racism. Robert Louis Stevenson's *In the South Seas* was also useful, if more tainted by period condescension.

Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*

Finally, a personal choice: my favorite Bolaño novel. Reading Bolaño for the first time a dozen years ago was liberating. *The Savage Detectives* taught me that writers can make good subjects for fiction, that formally inventive fiction can and should be emotionally compelling, and that "show, don't tell" is a guideline rather than a rule.

Other novels that influenced *Crossings* were Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, and Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*.

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Reading Group Questions

1. Right from the opening line, appropriation is a major theme in *Crossings*. How does the novel explore this theme? And to what end?
2. The conceit of the crossing allows the reader to inhabit the bodies of characters of a variety of cultures, sexualities, genders, classes, and races. What does the novel have to say about identity?
3. Discuss how *Crossings* challenges the reader's ability to distinguish the real from the fake, and why this might be important.
4. *Crossings* traverses 150 years and seven lifetimes in under four hundred pages. Discuss how language, form, and genre are used to drive the narrative forward across this timeframe.
5. "I am Alula. I am the one who remembers. You are Koahu. You are the one who forgets." Memory and forgetting are major themes. Discuss how past and present relate in the novel. *Crossings* is preoccupied with history. What kind of history is the book interested in, and why?
6. Alula believes Koahu forgets his previous lives when he crosses, except in his dreams. And yet if he cannot remember his previous selves, what claim does he have to being the person she says he is? How does the novel suggest identity might be possible without memory?
7. If Alula decides on the spur of the moment to cross with Joubert as a desperate act of love, what does she learn about love as a result of her decision?
8. What role do morality and ethics play in *Crossings*? Is there a moral to the novel?



9. What is the nature of the relationship between Balthazar and Artopoulos? And is Artopoulos’s final judgment of Balthazar—“You are *evil!*”—justified?
10. The narrator of “City of Ghosts” claims to fall in love with Madeleine even though he disbelieves everything she believes. Is it truly possible to fall in love with someone whose belief system is so different to one’s own that one questions their capacity to reason?
11. *Crossings* is, in fact, two books, with two beginnings, middles, and ends. They’re quite different from each other, but they consist of exactly the same words. What is the effect of this structure? Which is the better book? Could a third sequence be envisaged?
12. *Crossings* may be a fantasy concept, but what corollaries does it have in our real lives? What religion or other belief system does crossing most resemble?

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