



A Rose for Winter

Laurie Lee

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He writes like an angel, and conveys the pride and vitality of the humblest Spanish life with unfailing sharpness, zest and humour - *Sunday Times*

Andalusia is a passion - and fifteen years after his last visit Laurie Lee returned. He found a country broken by the Civil War, but the totems of indestructible Spain survive; the Christ in agony, the thrilling flamenco cry, the gypsy intensity in vivid whitewashed slums, the cult of the bullfight, the exultation in death, the humour of hopelessness and the paradoxes deep in the fiery bones of Spain. Rich with kaleidoscopic images, *A Rose for Winter* is as evocative as the sun-scorched landscape of Andalusia itself.

Cover Photograph: Irene Lamprakou

A Rose for Winter Details

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John says

This man wrote the most beautiful English and his powers of description, both of people and places was fantastic. I found however that he left me wanting to know more about Kati, his wife, who was with him the whole time but barely gets a mention. Would have given five stars but for this.

An added bonus for me is that I have been to most the towns he describes.

Tom says

I have been meaning to read Lee for a while and when a friend lent me this book, I couldn't resist. I know this isn't one of his best known works but it is a very enjoyable read. His writing style and content reflects his true passions in life, namely his longing for travel and his love of poetry. The prose is almost magical in its rhythm and meter.

A Rose For Winter covers a trip to Southern Spain that Laurie and his wife Kati took in the 1950s. They had visited this part of the world 15 years before and returned to a country which had been stricken by civil war and the resulting poverty. A country in which noone trusted their neighbour due to the suspicion and reputation of the secret police. Lee is able to take all this, with a real sense of personal sorrow, and bring out the underlying spirit of the Iberian/Moorish people and culture.

I have a sense, both from this book and what I've read about Lee, that he is better than any advertising travel company in evoking the emotions of the very soul of what travel should be. The way Laurie and his wife ingratiate themselves with everyone they meet, are willing to follow their noses, ears and eyes in a spontaneous fashion at every opportunity and take part in/witness everything that makes the region special, from bullfighting to flamenco to cuisine, gives the reader as close a sense as you can imagine to the essence of Southern Spain.

In some ways I feel that A Rose for Winter has come to represent a critique of a 21st century approach to travel. Fleeting visits, weekend breaks and whistle stop tours do not reach beneath the surface of a country's skin to find its heart and in many ways, that is a genuine shame.

Doubtless Spain has changed in countless ways since Lee's visit but I'm sure that if one were able to spend an extended period there, you would make the same discoveries that Lee brings out in this book.

Aamir Ansari says

A book to read and savor.

PeterJ says

I love the way Laurie Lee writes but I'm not interested in travel books so struggled to get through it despite it being pretty short. If you have an interest in 1950's travel in Spain though, do read it. You'll probably enjoy it.

Mark says

My first experience of Lee was 'Cider with Rosie' at 14 and I full on loathed it. We analyzed and dissected it into tiny pieces during my O Level studies at school and that quite often signals the death knell for love of a book unless it is of particular perfection. CwR, in my opinion was not. It was years before I picked up another Lee and then it was 'As I walked out one Midsummer morning' which was volume two of his biography or memoir and I loved it. Since then I have also read 'A Moment of War', the final volume and so when I saw this lying in a pile in another second hand book shop I picked it up in respect of the latter experiences rather than the first one. It doesn't disappoint.

Lee and his wife are returning to Spain 15 years after he last visited it and they arrive in the isolated and poverty stricken Spain of Franco against whom Lee had tried to wage battle, none too successfully, in 'A moment of War'

"It did not take more than five minutes to wipe out fifteen years and to return me whole to this thorn-cruel, threadbare world, sombre with dead and dying Christs, brassy with glittering Virgins"

In this sentence you encounter the Lee you are going to be accompanied by throughout his couple of months exploring this re-discovered Spain. He is a poet, he is a man brimming over with memory and yet full of expectation that he will find primitive superstition and ecclesial power walking hand in hand. He is, in part, right of course but as the rediscovering goes on he falls in love again with the magnificent beauty and wildness of Spain, he finds people and views and welcome which take his breath away and humble him.

Palm trees exploded darkly overhead

The foothills climbed in writhing terraces...flashed among drifting clouds like a string of jagged moons

Granada's winter air is a killer, moving so slow it will slay a man yet not seem strong enough to blow out a candle

On the flamenco

The man is all voice; the woman all pride and hunger. While his song climbs into ecstasies of improvisation she coils in toils and sobs and throbs around him. And always there is the invisible guitar, whipping them delicately from the darkness, feeding their secret fevers

Wow, that is some seductive and sensual picture he paints. He is deeply in love with this people and this place and it comes alive in his writing. He describes bread making and olives and wine with such affection and yearning that I was pleased I was reading this on holiday and able to indulge my taste buds whilst reading it.

The cottage in which I was staying was on the shore of Derwentwater, a beautiful lake in Cumbria. Light pollution from Keswick, two miles or so away curtailed my adoration of the night sky a little though not as much as when i am in Poole where the street lights ravage the night sky with their horrible bright fingers but Lee describes stars in such a way that you close your eyes and are there with him seeing them clearly inspite of your own actual experience of 21st Century Western night skys.

At another time he speaks of daybreak

Gradually the cloud throbbed red with light, then suddenly caught the still unrisen sun and burst like an expanding bomb.....after the long unthinking darkness everything now began to happen at once. The stars snapped shut, the sky bled green, vermillion tides ran over the water, the hills around took on the colour of firebrick and the great sun drew himself at last raw and dripping from the waves

Excuse the long quote but it was so lovely, so clever, so just right.

There is humour and fun. He pokes fun at himself, at his wife who yet is adored and feted by every mortal spaniard they appear to meet whether male or female, at his hosts and at his companions on the journey but the poking fun is gentle and affectionate.

Careering, as i am, towards the big 50 next year i have begun to learn the cello. At the moment it sounds remarkably like I am slaughtering my cat for 15 minutes every day and I feel for my poor teacher. Lee spoke of his taking lessons on the guitar whilst staying in Seville and reported it thusly and i feel it is how Amanda, my teacher, must feel:

After an hour's examination, during which he tested all my faulty coordinations, he would hand me a page of exercises and bid me take them twice a day. Then with a little bow, his chin resting mournfully upon his paper tie, he would leave me to visit his next patient

I could load quote upon quote but i have tried to give a small sample to try to show the type of book it is. It is a travelogue in which he shares his thoughts and experiences and enables us to taste just a little of his love. The harshness and difficulty of the life of the poor in Spain is made clear and he in no way tries to lessen it, he wishes us to see the beauty whlst feeling the pain and it is, to use a horribly overused phrase, a lovely extended love letter to this place which has been so influential on his past and therefore on his future.

My only caveat in my endless hymn of praise is one totally based on personal feelings. Lee, like so many other writers before and since, goes into ecstasy over bullfighting. The magnificence of the spectacle, of the beauty of the matadors, of the raw power of the bulls but i always struggle with how this cruelty can ever be seen as anything but brutal savagery. I realize Lee was writing this in 1955 or so and the world and our outlook on so many things has changed and so maybe I need to take that into consideration but at one point he remarks on how one of the bulls comes into the ring and cowers in terror against the wall and is pricked and barbed and forced into fighting. It turned my stomach in October 2012, I cannot believe that would not have done the same had i been there in April 1955.

Andy says

Even the most basic travelogue becomes a piece of poetry in Laurie Lee's hands and every sentence demonstrates his non-judgemental love of people at a micro level, each individual, each weakness, each grandiose gesture and pathos generating scenario. He's so very readable.

Garnette says

This is the first book by Laurie Lee that I've read, and I wasn't particularly impressed. He made his literary reputation on his three-volume autobiography, the final book recounting his experiences fighting against Franco in Spain. Any of these books would probably be a better choice, but I chose this one because I, too, was traveling in Andalusia. Lee returned to southern Spain 15 years after the war had ended, and his account is full of nostalgia and regret, recalling companions long dead or exiled from Franco's Spain. Lee contrasts the hopeful idealism of the anti-Franco forces during the war to the depressed hopelessness of Franco Spain 15 years later. I, meanwhile, marveled at the pleasure-seeking tourist haven of the Costa del Sol some sixty years after that. The times they are a-changing.

Stefan says

Beautiful prose, but rather lacking in actual, meaty content. I still recommend it as Laurie's romanticized account is very satisfying to read.

Roxy Ali says

Unless you are keen on hearing someone's holiday tales then this isn't the book for you.

electricity woman says

After reading a few snippets when I picked it up, my hopes were soaring high. Lee's opening few paragraphs describing Granada are one of the most poignant on the topic. Sadly, his landscape descriptions are the only redeeming quality of his narrative.

We get occasional glints of stunning prose, from inbetween the extravagant sexualisation of school girls and the treatment of women as though they're nothing more than the static decoration to his travels.

This slim travel novel will give you an idealized version of *men's* lives in Spain of the 50s through the eyes of someone who envies the culture of macho bravado. I doubt he loved Spain as much as he loved gallivanting through Spain like one of the lads, invincible in their brotherhood and at the same time declaring himself innocent of their behaviour's implications because he's foreign. I cannot remember an example of a conversation with a woman for the entire book, even though every single male character is given a rhapsodic, almost biblical homage. Other than that, no attempt to understand the ways of life around him is shown.

In essence, it's a game of blending in and playing along. Our author openly revels in it and definitely doesn't skip any opportunity to either sing the praises of the "swaggering" machos with faces like a "gypsy's warning" or to lament how "today their claws are clipped and rhetoric their only weapon".

Beautiful writing. Heartbreaking and occasionally disturbing message. Not sure why anyone has thought that describing schoolgirls as sexual is a-okay, provided it's done by a poet abroad.

Marius van Blerck says

This is one of Laurie Lee's lesser-known books, telling of his third journey through Spain almost 20 years after he first wandered into the country, busking with his violin. In his second visit he went back to Spain, at the outbreak of the Civil War, and found himself fighting for the Republicans. Told in a simple but lyrical style, Laurie Lee's use of language is breathtaking. His feeling for the people he meets and the places he visits are expressed in words that are hard to describe. This book is simply wonderful!

Richard Newbold says

An anomaly in the chronology of Laurie Lee's oeuvre in that though the events described in "A Rose for Winter" happened in Andalusia years after those of his two most famous works "Cider With Rosie" and "As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning", this book was published before them. Anyhoo, it's as a travelogue that I fell in love with this book, and now that I am visiting Andalusia regularly, rereading it makes for a great appetiser for each trip. A mix of lyrical narrative, pathos and homage to Spain's unique and indomitable spirit (under the murderous tyranny of Franco and the Fascists), its timeless poetic quality is moving and quite irresistible. Strangely it's the town of Algeciras, now an unlovely port and the hub for the Spanish petrochemical industries, in which the essence of Spain is evoked most vividly - though ironically I've yet to visit it.

Alex says

The Romance of travel writing

Without a doubt the best form of escape, all the humour of being an Englishman abroad put into the poetic frame of 'going native'.

Jean Marriott says

If I could I would give more than 5 * to this book. Laurie Lee has been my one favourite writers ever since I read 'Cider with Rosie'. His travel writing is poetic and lyrical, his description are beautiful. This book is about a return journey to Spain 15 years after the end of the Civil War. Lee had traveled and fell in love with Spain before the war.

Pauline Liu-Devereux says

Wonderful

I can't imagine why it has taken me so long to read this. Now I'm planning to read it again without delay. A marvelous and moving evocation of how Spain was and still, in some semi hidden places, still might be.
