

# Aegypt Short Guide

## Aegypt by John Crowley

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## Characters

As in *Little, Big* (1981), *Aegypt* contains a number of sharply drawn characters seeking fulfillment. Pierce Moffett, romantically rejected and impoverished by a broken drug deal, yearns for something to counter his disillusionment. His belief in his own vocation, that is, a calling to history, provides the motivation to counter his disillusionment. Much like Pierce Moffett, Rosie Rasmussen Mucho seeks a happier life as well. Hurt by the process of divorcing her unfaithful husband Mike, Rosie returns home to her Uncle Boney at Arcady. There, she discovers that the historical novelist she has been reading with great interest, Fellowes Kraft, was himself not only a family friend but also a literary property controlled by the Rasmussen family foundation. It is the mutual interest of Moffett and Rosie in the deceased Fellowes Kraft that connects the two plot lines. Like Moffett, Fellowes knew of the other history and sought to present it in his writing.

Fellowes Kraft's presence infuses much of *Aegypt*. A collector of historical artifacts, he came to own many of the objects he describes in his historical fictions, including the molestone which Doctor John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's court astrologer, employed to contact the angel world. Extensive passages from Dee's novels form portions of *Aegypt*, and his last work, unfinished and tentatively titled *Pica Trix*, serves as the climax of the novel. Reading it, Moffett comes to realize that Fellowes Kraft's novel is very much the same book he has planned to write. In addition, he finally comes to see that as time propels everyone into the future, each individual's experience turns into a fiction, a small story, or history, which fits into a larger whole.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Aegypt, the first in Crowley's four-novel sequence, is a book about history, or more accurately, histories. In it, Pierce Moffett, a troubled historian, forsakes his position at Barnabas College in New York to resettle in bucolic Blackberry Jamb where he plans to write a history. In the process, Moffett comes to learn much, including that the standard story of human life is not necessarily the only story, that there may indeed be many histories. Once again, Crowley employs Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* as a source in his theme of memory in the novel, a theme which investigates the connection between history and memory. As in *Little, Big*, Crowley demonstrates in *Aegypt* that the stories that make up individual lives are much like small Chinese boxes nested in larger ones.

Of the many histories of this world, Moffett postulates a secret one, a history in which magic dominates over science, in which astrology holds a valid predictive value, and in which the old world view of the great chain of being and the harmony of the spheres still operates. Gypsies, he believes, serve as a paradigm for this secret history. Questioned why they are reputed to be so adept at telling fortunes, Moffett postulates a home for the Gypsies, Aegypt, a country whose natives possessed magical skills. Sometime in the past, the country Aegypt ceased to exist; all that remains of that mysterious land are the descendants of the former inhabitants, gypsies, possessing the magical skills in sadly decaying form. Moffett believes that like the gypsies, bits of an older science — sometimes seen in the form of astrology and superstitions — persist to this day, even after being superseded by modern science.

In addition to these considerations of history, science, and memory, Crowley introduces a pastoral theme. Moffett forsakes the city and a failed romance for the country and the possibilities for spiritual as well as romantic renewal.

His guide to the country, a former student named Spofford, lives in a rustic cabin and tends a flock of sheep, serving in this way as a foil to the citified Moffett and an evocation of the pastoral ideal. In addition, a large portion of the novel is set at Boney Rasmussen's country house, Arcady, a reference, of course, to the classical region and reputed home of pastoral simplicity.

# Techniques

A sophisticated and controlled novel, *Aegypt* is Crowley's most mature work.

A much different novel from his four earlier efforts, *Aegypt* is not easily classified into the fantasy or science fiction categories Crowley has employed previously. Despite the fact that the novel begins with a mage peering into a molestone and communicating with the world of angels, the novel is not a fantasy — no more a fantasy, at least, than is Robertson Davies's *What's Bred in the Bone*, a novel which purports to be recounted by the Angel of Biography and the protagonist's guardian angel. Composed of two major plot lines, those of Pierce Moffett and Rosie Rasmussen Mucho, the novel integrates its fictional world with historical personages from the classical period through the Renaissance. Thus, Crowley introduces the young Shakespeare, James Burbage, Giordano Bruno, and others as he advances his fiction. In one sense, this method results in a novel about history and science which is itself a historical novel, as well as a novel of historical science. Crowley divides his novel into chapters that move from one plot line to another, from one historical period to another, and from one fictive level to another. As in *Little, Big*, Crowley nests his paradoxes within paradoxes.

Claiming that events from his life have been disguised and introduced into his earlier novels *The Deep* and *Beasts*, Crowley has provided a biographical dimension in his later works as well. Hired as a proofreader for the telephone directory in New York, Crowley employs Smoke Barnable in the identical occupation in *Little, Big*.

There are other connections between the novels as well. In *Little, Big*, the lamp shade in Smokey's son's room, a locomotive which moves through a landscape as the light bulb heats the shade, appears in *Aegypt*, this time in young Pierce Moffett's bedroom. The Drinkwater house at Edgewood is strongly suggestive of the London house of Doctor Dee. These links reveal one facet of Crowley's method of artistic invention, a method which has resulted in a succession of thoughtfully written, intelligent novels.



## Key Questions

A complex book, *Aegypt* provides a wealth of topics for discussion. Those interested in the history and literature of the Renaissance will find much to occupy their attention; Crowley recreates a number of Renaissance historical figures with great skill and demonstrates his knowledge of the details of daily life at the close of the sixteenth century. Comparing Sir Philip Sidney's pastoral *Arcadia* to the pastoral life of upstate New York may provide a number of insights into Crowley's novel as well. Discussion groups may want to pursue Crowley's concepts of time and memory. Is his theory of shifting physical laws plausible? Could it be considered a metaphor for the way that our memory sometimes shifts the truth of events as time passes?

Pierce Moffet, Crowley's central character, is a complicated individual.

Group members may profit from discussing Pierce's relationships to women and the tangled state of his professional life. Additionally, discussions about Pierce and his favorite author, Fellowes Kraft, may prove fruitful.

Some critics feel that in this novel Crowley begins to move away from the fantasy genre and into mainstream fiction. Has he handled the supernatural matters, the angels and crystal balls, in a "mainstream" way.

1. What are the skills of ancient Aegypt? Where can they be located today?
2. How does the world of John Dee differ from the twentieth century according to Crowley? What difference in physical laws exists?
3. For Crowley, how is history like memory? Do history and memory change over time? How is this reflected in the novel?
4. What was Pierce's life like in New York City? How does his lifestyle change when he moves to Blackbury Jambs?
5. Fellowes Kraft, though never a living character in the novel, exerts a great influence on Pierce and Rosie Rasmussen. What purpose does Kraft serve in advancing Crowley's themes?
6. Why are there two characters named Rose in the novel? How are Rose Ryder and Rosie Rasmussen character foils?
7. Writers feature prominently in *Aegypt*. Identify characters who conceive of themselves as writers. Are the books that they write or intend to write the same? Different?
8. What is the main source of Pierce's unhappiness? At the end of the novel, do you notice any change in his character? If you saw a change, is it positive or negative?



9. In what way does Crowley employ elements of the fantasy novel in Aegypt?
10. Since Aegypt the first novel in a projected four-volume sequence, what predictions can you make about the remaining three novels? Has he included any hints?

## Literary Precedents

Crowley's style in *Aegypt* suggests John Fowles's *Daniel Martin* (1977) in its richness and complexity, a connection touted by Crowley's publisher, Bantam, which also compares him to John Updike and John Gardner.

*Aegypt*'s Author's Note, however, acknowledges Crowley's borrowings from other authors, among them: Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Peter French, Giorgio di Santillana, and especially Dame Frances Yates whose *The Art of Memory* provides Crowley with one of the most important themes in his novel. Beyond these stylistic and authorial acknowledgements, Crowley's *Aegypt* at times shows its debt to genres as diverse as Marchette Chute's documentary biography *Shakespeare of London* and Joyce Carol Oates's novels *Bellefleur* (1980), *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1986).



## Related Titles

The sequel to *Aegypt* is *Love & Sleep* (see separate entry). The second novel in Crowley's tetralogy employs many of the same characters as *Aegypt* and continues to develop the themes of time and memory that occupy Crowley in *Aegypt*. *Love & Sleep* carries forward the main plot lines: the search for the world's secret history and the struggle of Pierce Moffett for personal happiness. The two novels are complimentary, *Aegypt* focusing on Moffett's recent disappointments while *Love & Sleep* presenting key experiences from his youth; they enrich each other, but can stand alone. This pairing of the individual's search for fulfillment with a mysterious plan of grand scope that exceeds understanding is also central to Crowley's fantasy novel, *Little, Big*.

In addition, Crowley's short story collection, *Novelty*, focuses on history and myth, time and memory.



# Copyright Information

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