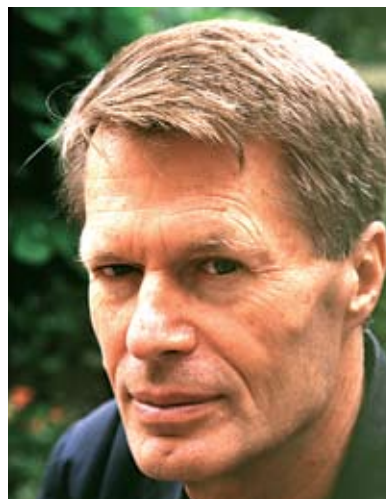




## The Nobel Prize in Literature 2008

“author of new departures,  
poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy,  
explorer of a humanity beyond  
and below the reigning civilization”



J. SASSIER

### Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio

**Born:** 1940

**Birthplace:** France

**Nationality:** French and  
Mauritian citizen

# Speed read: Language as belonging

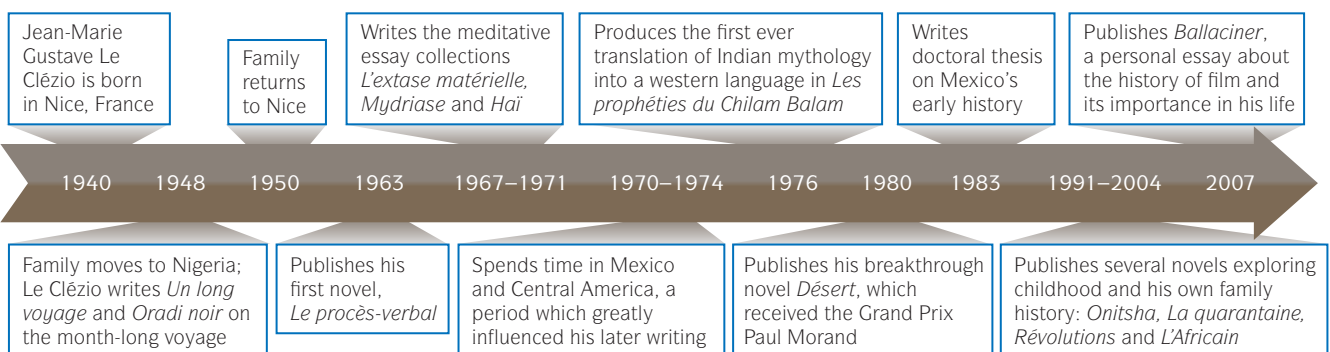


Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio has said that the French language is the only place where he feels a sense of belonging. He is someone who has always lived on the edge, and in-between, and is hard to identify with a single locality. Itinerant from childhood, he has continued to travel, and now divides his time between New Mexico, on the frontier between North and South America, Nice, on the very edge of France, and Mauritius, a small island where the confrontation of land and sea is inescapable. Coming from a line of emigrants and immigrants, his family is dispersed all over the world.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his background, he has always been interested in thresholds. For instance, his novels explore the transformation from childhood into adulthood (*Cœur brûlé et autres romances*), voyages that result in the confrontation of cultures (*Désert*), and the points where past, present and future collide (*Ourania*). “Writing for me is like travelling”, says

Le Clézio, who shows us that we are all emigrants, that we all face futures that are both liberating and terrifying.

Le Clézio’s talent was recognised from the beginning; his first published novel (*Le procès-verbal*) written when he was 23, received the Renaudot prize. The early novels are highly experimental in style and intellectually challenging. They present a bleak picture of modern western urban existence, as one of alienation, aggression and enslavement to materiality (*Les géants*). Then, in the late 1970s, Le Clézio’s style and thinking underwent a radical change, partly as a result of his experience of living with the Emberas Indians in the Panamanian forest between 1970 and 1974. Le Clézio is an expert on early Amerindian mythology and culture and produced the first ever translation of Indian mythology into a western language in *Les prophéties du Chilam Balam*. His experience in Panama developed his thinking about the limits of western rationalism and its dangerous devaluation of emotions and spirituality, and also of the natural world. His novels became more focused on story and character as the means to analyse the limits of western culture. More recently, as part of his exploration of the interaction between past, present and future, he has turned to his own family history and made it the subject of his novels.



Timeline: Milestones for the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio.

# In his own words: Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio

“Writing for me is like travelling. It’s getting out of myself and living another life, maybe a better life.” Travelling and writing are intertwined in the life of Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, or J.M.G. Le Clézio as he calls himself in his books. “I enjoy very much being in a foreign country, in a new country, new place. And I enjoy also beginning a new book. It’s like being someone else.”

Having grown up in many countries, and with his time now spent in New Mexico, Nice and Mauritius, Le Clézio identifies with different cultures. Yet he still maintains a special bond with his country of birth, France; though he is bilingual, Le Clézio still writes in his first language. “When I was a child I grew up speaking French. My first contact with literature was in French, and that’s the reason why I write in French.”

“Writing for me is like travelling. It’s getting out of myself and living another life, maybe a better life”

Le Clézio’s healthy appetite for writing stems from the sheer enjoyment of putting pen to paper. “One of my greatest pleasures in life is to sit at a table, wherever it is. I don’t have any office, I can write everywhere. So, I put a piece of paper on the table and then I travel.”

His desire to travel and to write has allowed Le Clézio to document many places, cultures and possibilities. For example, he has spent time among the Amerindians, whose culture he finds particularly appealing and one that he believes Europeans can learn a lot from. “It’s a culture so different from the European culture, and on the other hand it didn’t have the chance of expressing itself. It’s a culture which has been in some ways broken by the modern world, and especially by the conquests from Europe. So, I feel there is a strong message



**J.M.G. Le Clézio’s writings reflect his passion for different countries and cultures.**

here for the Europeans to encounter this culture which is so different from the European culture.”

Le Clézio describes his role as writer as follows: “A writer is not a prophet, not a philosopher; he’s just someone who is witness to what is around him. And so writing is the best way to testify, to be a witness.”

For those unfamiliar with his works, Le Clézio has no specific recommendations, suggesting instead that interested readers should be guided by their own feelings. “Reading is a free practice. I think the readers are free to begin by the books where they want to. They don’t have to be led in their reading.” In other words, readers embarking on a journey through the countries and cultures described in his works are required to do some travelling of their own.

“A writer is not a prophet, not a philosopher; he’s just someone who is witness to what is around him”



This article is based on a telephone interview with Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio following the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature. To listen to the interview in full, visit [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2008/clezio-interview.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2008/clezio-interview.html)