Whatever Happened to MARGO?

Jeremy Miles hears about fun-loving Margo Durrell who emerged from the shadow of her famous brothers, Lawrence and Gerald, to make her mark on Bournemouth.

The cast of the ITV series The Durrells: Margo (Daisy Waterstone), Gerry (Milo Parker), Larry (Josh O'Connor), Louisa (Keley Hawes) and Leslie (Callum Woodhouse)
The famously free-spirited Durrell family probably didn’t realise it at the time, but when they ditched their digs in dank 1930s Bournemouth and headed for the sunshine of Corfu they were writing a little piece of history.

Widow Louisa and her children Larry, Margo, Leslie and Gerry spent only a few idyllic years on the Greek island but it was long enough to sow the seeds of a legacy that lives large to this day. Eighty years later millions tune in each week to watch The Durrells, a good-hearted ITV drama series based on their exploits. What many don’t know is that by the 1950s and 60s the family was firmly back in Bournemouth.

Gerald was finding fame as a pioneering naturalist, conservationist and best-selling author; he would go on to establish the famous Jersey Zoo and Durrell Wildlife Trust.

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Eldest brother Larry was the literary superstar, Lawrence Durrell, author of The Alexandria Quartet. Fans of the TV show will not be surprised that Leslie made a rather less spectacular impact. Always the most vulnerable of the siblings, he was living over a Bournemouth off-licence with his gun collection, lurching from one failed business venture to the next.

But what of their sister Margo? In The Durrells she is portrayed as a force of nature, a scatty, fun-loving teenager determined to make her presence felt amidst the creative chaos of her brothers. By all accounts it’s a fairly shrewd reading of her character. For the real Margo was loved by everyone and remained at the hub of the Durrell family for the rest of her life. She died aged 87 in 2007.

Despite being charismatic, joyful and leading an extraordinary life, she never sought the limelight and so was rather eclipsed in the public-eye by her famous brothers.

Tracy laboriously retyped it and, in 1995 this fascinating and rather madcap tale finally arrived on the nation’s bookshelves. Whatever happened to Margo? was well received but by the time The Durrells hit the small screen it had been out of print for years. Now Penguin has republished Margo’s book and no one could be more delighted than Tracy, the daughter of Gerry Breeze the elder of Margo’s two sons.

“She told me. “I loved my nan. She was such an amazing person and we were incredibly close because she brought me up from the age of 11 when my mother died.” She remembers Margo being open-minded, adventurous and above all lots of fun. “She was the heart and soul of the family.”

In the opening episode of the latest series of The Durrells, mother Louisa describes Margo as having “a mind like a roomful of starlings.” Was she really that scatterbrained? Tracy doesn’t hesitate. “No, free-spirited would be a more accurate term.” The TV show, she admits, is a little
exaggerated but she loves it. “The impact it’s having on the Durrell family is fantastic. It’s helping to sell Uncle Gerry’s books and promoting the Jersey Zoo which is continuing his work with endangered species.” Gerry, whose book My Family and Other Animals is all about their time on Corfu, died in 1995. “For me that ticks all the boxes. As for seeing my grandmother portrayed as a teenager, well that just makes me smile.”

Margo’s book starts with her return to Bournemouth in 1947. Her marriage to a dashing RAF pilot, Jack Breeze, is sadly over and she has two small children to bring up. She spends an inheritance on buying a substantial property in the Bournemouth suburb of Charminster with the intention of running a boarding house.

However, her brother Gerald arrives and establishes a small menagerie of exotic animals in her back garden and has several chimpanzees and a six foot python as house pets.

As for those paying tenants – a large number of gentle men callers lead to suspicions that she is running a brothel.

Add to that, two mischievous sons and her mother Louisa (who died in 1964) living over the road with Maria her Corfiot maid who Leslie had managed to get pregnant and... well you get the picture.

Tracy remembers the house, at 51 St Albans Avenue, well. She says that Margo’s live and let live philosophy meant everyone was welcome. “She would probably have taken in the tenants other people were turning away. She just accepted everyone for who they were.

“The Durrells were all very down earth despite coming from a privileged background. One minute Uncle Gerry would be talking to Princess Diana and the next he’d be asking the dustman in for a cup of tea. There were no barriers.”

Tracy insists that growing up as a member of the Durrell family just seemed normal to her. “As a child I don’t think I realised how special it was. I was very lucky..."
indeed to be brought up by my nan. She was my best friend and we had great adventures. We even went back to Corfu which she had always felt such strong connection to.”

Margo was described at her funeral by Gerry’s widow, Lee Durrell director of the Durrell Wildlife Trust, as: “One of a kind who sparkled with her own special joie de vivre and enriched the lives of everyone around her with an aura of happy serenity and a marvellous sense of fun.”

Her friends and family in Bournemouth knew Margo as a woman who loved reading, art exhibitions, walking by the sea and visiting churches. Needless to say this latter interest crossed all faiths. Even though she was a chanting Buddhist she worked for a time as an enthusiastic guide to Christchurch Priory.

Margo also wrote another book. The manuscript tells of a time when her children had grown up and she was looking for a new adventure. She answered a small ad in the local newspaper to crew on a Greek cruise line sailing the Caribbean. Her second memoir is called Growing Old Graciously and Tracy is hoping to find a publisher for that too.

Watch this space! •

**Whatever Happened to Margo?** is published by [Penguin](https://www.penguin.co.uk) and *The Durrells* is currently on [ITV](https://www.itv.com) every Sunday at 8pm.