

THE PERSIAN BOY BY MARY RENAULT

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The Persian Boy, a novel by Mary Renault, depicts the dramatic historical figure of Alexander the Great, the renowned king of Macedon. In his lifetime, Alexander expanded his empire into Greece, Persia, and then India, taking the titles of Pharaoh of Egypt and Lord of Asia (among other monikers). With a deep sense of empathy and compassion for his losses and hardships, *The Persian Boy* is a thoughtful, in depth look at Alexander's many years on campaign, which depicts him as distinctly human in the face of extraordinary, seemingly divine, deeds. The novel is told through the eyes of Bagoas, a Persian bed slave who was an actual historical figure. Focusing on his life and relationship with Alexander, Renault has an excellent, nuanced understanding of each character, displayed through a lovely variety of moral greys. Alexander, who is depicted as an honourable and generous man who desires to love and be loved above all else, is also responsible for great horrors which the book does not shy away from. Bagoas, a slave who suffered abuse and terrors from the tender age of seven, has not been warped and jaded by his experiences and is instead gentle and loving despite, and possibly because of, the tragedies of his past. In antiquity, where trauma would be a common occurrence, there would likely only be the option to adapt and move on, or break and die.

Aside from insight into the possible personalities and motivations of historical figures, cultural distinctions and parallels between Persians, Macedonians and Greeks are made abundantly clear. The superiority which both sides feel, whether subtle or incredibly obvious, is artfully illustrated through Bagoas' perspective as a Persian, an outsider whose ignorance of Greek customs is a source of both conflict and insight. Among the cultural commentary are smaller historical details which speak of the author's love for history and brings the characters to life through Bagoas' narration. An accomplished historian herself, Renault uses reputable primary sources such as the Greek author Arrian, while warning the reader away from more dubious sources such as the works of Curtius, a Roman historian. As a result, her work is a mix of logical fiction and many references to reputable sources regarding Alexander the Great.

Notably, considering the typical Greek attitude of superiority that many of his generals and soldiers express, the respect Alexander shows his enemies and foreign troops could easily be confused with a tolerant ideology for other cultures. Realistically, in a time of virulent nationalism and intolerance of foreigners, such a perspective would be wholly inappropriate or, at the very least, a view held by the very few and very unique. That said, Renault's characterization of Alexander does not superimpose modern values, and his respect instead stems from an exceptional regard for anyone who maintains a high sense of honour and/or military skill.

According to Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, this characterization could be spot on. Plutarch alleges that the same man who took troops and slaughtered the citizens of Thebes before burning the city to the ground and selling the survivors into slavery, allowed a Theban woman to go free simply because of her "calm and fearless bearing...[which filled Alexander] with admiration".¹ This single event exemplifies this characterization of Alexander, by highlighting the obvious brutality he was capable of in contrast with an unusual desire to reward excellence: whether the exemplary figure be man or woman, fellow Greek or rival Persian. The charismatic and passionate personality of Renault's Alexander matches the vision of many scholars. He was a man whose personality alone "had carried an army more than 10,000 miles"² from their home and even persuaded his enemies to join his ranks. His charisma and excellence was so extraordinary that the mother of the Persian king, Sisygambis, grieved Alexander's death "as if she had lost another son"³ and ultimately starved herself to death in response.⁴

Aimed at a wide variety of readers, Renault's novel is suitable for academics, casual fans of the classics, or anyone with an interest in historical romance and war. It is, of course, worth mentioning that virtually all the sources are filled with bias and uncertain events. Her efforts at historical accuracy are extensive, but, keeping in mind how little we know, it is impossible for anything to be entirely factual. Considering that, *The Persian Boy* is as historically authentic as one can expect, and Renault does a wonderful job of maintaining historical contexts and perspectives. Overall, Mary Renault's novel is an excellent example of what could have been, and *The Persian Boy* is as much truth as anything else.

¹ Plutarch. *The Age of Alexander*. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert and Timothy Duff. (England: Penguin Classics, 1973), 292.

² Edward Anson. *Alexander the Great: Themes and Issues*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 181.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

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