2007

Book Review: *Empire of Ashes*

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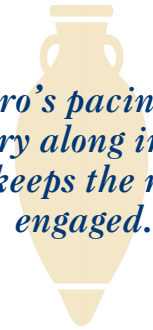
by Jeanne Reames

Nicholas Nicastro. *Empire of Ashes: A Novel of Alexander the Great.* Signet (http://us.penguingroup.com), 2004. Pp. 384. Paperback $7.99. ISBN 0-451-21366-1.

Three historical novels about Alexander the Great were published in 2004 to coincide with the November release of Oliver Stone's epic film on the conqueror: *The Virtues of War* by Steven Pressfield, who is best known for *Gates of Fire* (1998) about the Battle of Thermopylae; *Queen of the Amazons* by Judith Tarr, who wrote about Alexander once before in *Lord of the Two Lands* (1993); and *Empire of Ashes* by relative newcomer Nicholas Nicastro.

Empire of Ashes utilizes a frame format, narrating Alexander's story within the larger context of the trial of Machon, a fictional Athenian in the retinue of Alexander. Machon stands accused of impiety and a failure to fulfill his oath. The tale itself begins in Chapter Two where Nicastro describes life in ancient Athens with a vividness that leaps from the page. The trial is seen from the point of view of a jurist nicknamed Swallow who first hears Aeschines argue the case against Machon and then hears the detailed defense, given – to everyone's surprise – by Machon himself. Nicastro captures the timbre of ancient Athenian court rhetoric with Aeschines' prosecution, but the bulk of the story is related in Machon's more straightforward first-person narrative. Nicastro's obvious familiarity with ancient writing styles should be well appreciated by classicists and historians of the ancient world, and his pacing moves the story along in a way that keeps the reader engaged.

Nicastro employs a bit of mystery involving Arrhidaios, Alexander's half-brother, in order to hook the reader. He asks, "What if Alexander *wasn't* the military genius that history paints him? What if that were Arrhidaios instead?" Nicastro's Arrhidaios is an "idiot savant" – autistic – with this one extraordinary gift for strategy. Is this historically likely? Not really. But is it *possible*? Yes, of course – and that is all one needs for fiction. Those uncomfortable seeing Alexander displaced or who dislike historical novels that depart from the probable may not appreciate the twist. And although Nicastro's Alexander is far from unsympathetic, those who prefer Mary Renault's more heroic conqueror may also find themselves disappointed. I admit, however, that I was charmed by the notion of a teenaged Alexander with greasy hair and acne – an image characteristic of Nicastro's humanizing approach. He avoids both apologetics and exaggerated sensationalism.



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As an example of his more balanced approach, consider Nicastro's treatment of Alexander's sexuality. A number of modern critics of Stone's film were either unable or unwilling to grasp that the ancient world might have seen sex differently than we do. Alexander, who reputedly said that "sleep and sex remind me I'm mortal" suddenly became the subject of a media exposé. Fortunately, Nicastro treats the matter with appropriate (and refreshing) nonchalance. He neither avoids mention of Alexander's probable long-time attachment to Hephaistion nor dwells upon it.

Empire of Ashes is not, however, without historical error, although most are minor. For instance, Nicastro mentions Macedonian military "buzz cuts" (19), which is far too modern, and his depiction of Olympias (74-75) might have benefited from reading the work of historian Elizabeth Carney to provide a more nuanced view of the polygamous Macedonian court. Nicastro's choice of biographies could have been more critical as well. He lists the popular works of Mary Renault, Robin Lane Fox, and Michael Wood but not the scholarly biographies of A. B. Bosworth, Peter Green, or J. R. Hamilton. The scholarship consulted on Greek culture and warfare (by James Davidson, Victor Davis Hanson, and Sarah Pomeroy, for example) is more authoritative.

In the Afterword, Nicastro does explain his choices about changes in the historical details in a sensible and logical fashion. Some of these chosen alterations were deliberate. Nicastro's version of Alexander's death is unusual, to say the least, but to reveal it here would spoil the scene. He mentions the possible pregnancy of Statiera, Darius' wife, and her death in childbirth (141-143) but says nothing about Barsine, Alexander's known concubine. It seems a strange omission, as Alexander's involvement with Barsine was well documented, but anything with Statiera was rumor only. In fact, the name "Barsine" is used for Darius' daughter and may account for the elimination of Barsine, Artabasos' daughter – an attempt to avoid too many characters with the same name. Sometimes historical alterations are done to avoid confusing readers. As Nicastro himself says in his notes: "not all inaccuracies are mistakes" (367).

When reading a historical novel about Alexander, however, I am more interested in whether the writer has captured the overall feel of the ancient world, even if the story may contain some incorrect details. Nicastro has indeed done so, making *Empire of Ashes* one of the best recent novels on the conqueror.

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