

The book could have done with one, final proofreading: there are a few spelling slips; *Cleonymous* is thus often spelled (except in the Glossary); Apollo is said to have been born on Naxos; *Aggro* is said to be short for 'aggressor', which is news to me; the city of Megara is confused with its Sicilian namesake. However, most readers may not spot, nor mind, these small lapses; they will be charmed by the care taken to enliven the play and will find the whole enterprise a useful introduction to Aristophanes.

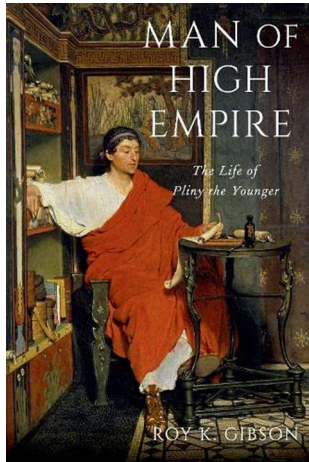
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000338

Man of High Empire

Gibson (R.K.) Pp. 320. Oxford University Press, 2022. Paper, £16.99. ISBN: 9780197654834.

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Roy Gibson's *Man of High Empire* is a biography about Pliny the Younger. Pliny's *Letters* are a useful source for topics such as Roman slavery, the roles of men and women in the Roman Empire, the emergence of Christianity, the political climate of the imperial senate, and of course the eruption of Vesuvius. Gibson is a world class expert on Pliny and so the book is detailed and scholarly. Yet what really separates Gibson from other Classicists is his accessible writing style. This book is thankfully free of the usual academic clichés such

as an abundance of semi-colons and obscurantist scholarly jargon. It is therefore realistic for busy teachers and students to read this text and learn something new about the Roman world.

The first chapter is an introduction and Gibson goes on to outline his argument in the second chapter. At the heart of Gibson's biography is his claim that Pliny presents himself in a variety of ways through his association with different geographical places. The chapters of Gibson's biography are structured along the lines of Pliny's different geographical *personae*. However, the book is also written in such a way that the chapters generally follow Pliny's life chronologically. This approach is unique and is useful for authors such as Pliny, where a great deal of pointless speculation would be employed in relation to Pliny's early life. Instead, the biography is fixed in the historical information which we can uncover from the *Letters* themselves. This structuring is also helpful in telling us about the ways in which various locations of the Roman world were associated with different virtues and vices. Gibson hopes that his work can inspire other biographies to take a geographical approach and the merits of doing so are in full display in this book.

In the third chapter, Gibson examines Pliny's association with his hometown of Comum and his early life. Particularly interesting is Gibson's comments on Pliny's elders. As Gibson states, Pliny's father died in his youth and so he was raised by older men such as Pliny the Elder, Spurinna, Corellius Rufus, Verginius Rufus, as well as the older woman Calpurnia Hispulla. Pliny's portrait of his life in Comum is therefore rooted in this fond memory of his 'elder network', which gives us an insight into the early lives of the many Roman men who did not have the traditional upbringing of the father.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Pliny's time in Campania and the famous Vesuvius letters, where Pliny tells us how he survived the eruption of Vesuvius as a young man. It is important to keep in mind that Pliny wrote his Vesuvius letters around a quarter of a century after the eruption. Gibson demonstrates that the letters are reflective in nature and Pliny is not shy in critiquing his poor past conduct. In fact, Gibson argues that the main purpose of the Vesuvius letters is to show the importance which Pliny the Elder had in helping to raise Pliny as a young man. Gibson contends that Pliny presents his uncle and adoptive father Pliny the Elder as a heroic figure who attempted to save stranded Romans from the eruption of Vesuvius, even if he was unsuccessful in doing so. As Gibson goes on to argue, the Vesuvius letters are part of a larger series of letters where Pliny reflects upon his uncle's exemplary conduct and hopes to meet and even exceed his dedication to study and virtue.

Chapter five shifts to Pliny's political career in Rome. Of most interest is Gibson's argument that Pliny has anxieties about the future of Rome under Trajan. Pliny has often been considered overwhelmingly optimistic about Trajan and it is not uncommon for classicists to consider him a sycophantic supporter of the Trajanic regime. Yet as Gibson convincingly argues, Pliny ceases to promote Trajan from Book 6 and Books 7–9 instead express doubt about the senate's ability to learn correct conduct after Domitian's tyranny and are filled with pessimistic letters about illness and death. Ultimately, Gibson contends that Pliny is optimistic about his own literary output and status but is surprisingly pessimistic politically despite Trajan returning to Rome from his Dacian conquests. This argument challenges the ways in which Pliny has commonly been considered politically.

In chapter six, Gibson considers Pliny's association with Umbria. Gibson demonstrates that Pliny had many friends from this region and that it was closer to him in Rome than Comum. Consequently, Pliny travelled to Umbria more frequently than to his hometown. However, Gibson contends that Umbria was not as advantageous to Pliny as Comum since it was not associated with the traditional Roman values which Pliny hoped to promote in his *Letters*. Gibson returns to Comum in chapter seven and examines Pliny's association with the town in his adult life. As Gibson outlines, Pliny presents Comum as possessing traditional virtues such as *frugalitas* (frugality) and *verecundia* (modesty). Pliny's marriage to the Comum-born Calpurnia was a way for him to promote his connections to the values of the Transpadane region.

Finally, chapter eight examines Pliny's time as a governor in the province of Bithynia-Pontus. As Gibson demonstrates, Pliny is often considered an incompetent and subservient governor of Trajan. However, Pliny had entered a province with a bad history of corrupt governing and past governors had even been brought to court by provincials. Pliny needed to exercise extreme caution and his letters to Trajan were well within the bounds of what was typically expected in imperial correspondence. Gibson details how Pliny had to take care when dealing with the elite of Bithynia-Pontus, delegate many matters to local officials, respect local

customs, and work carefully with Trajan. The difficulties of governing are clearly illustrated in this chapter.

In conclusion, this is a unique biography and a very accessible window into the life of Pliny. Most importantly, it demonstrates that Pliny was not self-conceited and was perceptive about himself and Rome's future.

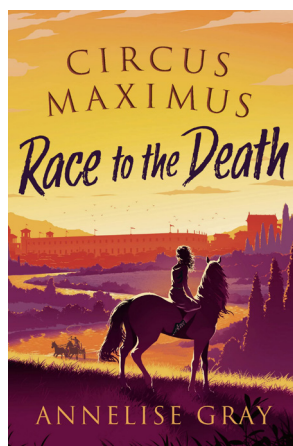
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000351

Circus Maximus: Race to the Death

Gray (A.) Pp. xiv + 347, ill. London: Zephyr, 2021. Cased, £6.99. ISBN: 9781800240575.

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I've seen this novel, aimed at 9–12 year olds ('middle grade'), described as 'Ben Hur meets *National Velvet*'. Young Dido rejects the traditional roles of a girl in ancient Rome in order to pursue fame as a charioteer at the Circus Maximus. Her father is a horse trainer and it is when he is murdered that she is not only placed in danger, but also liberated to pursue her adventure.

This is a rip-roaring tale centring on a female lead, but could it be one of those rare things, a book with a female protagonist which also appeals to boys? It is certainly lively and

compelling. This is a very well-researched novel, and young readers will also gain a wealth of background information about chariot racing, the Circus Maximus and the factions and politics of the different teams which competed – a subject which obsessed many Romans at the time. I would certainly recommend it to my pupils (although with the caveat that it is aimed at the slightly younger age-group).

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000363

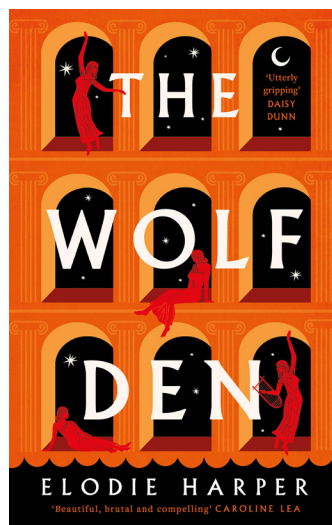
The Wolf Den

Harper (E.) Pp. 454. London: Head of Zeus, 2021. Cased, £7.99. ISBN: 9781838933531.

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This novel is the fictional story of Amara, sold into slavery in a brothel in 1st century Pompeii. *The Wolf Den* is the first of a trilogy which follows the progress of Amara. (Further titles are *The House*



with the *Golden Door* and *The Temple of Fortuna*.) During the course of *The Wolf Den*, Amara finds herself in a horrible situation, yet her determination to win a way out and to help out as many of her fellow sex workers as possible makes this book readable and hopeful. A theme is female empowerment – Amara must develop her business acumen and strategise in order to improve her lot.

The characters are nuanced – Amara who seems to have a strong moral compass finds herself becoming a loan-shark in order to get out of her predicament. It turns out that

the brothel owner, who at first seems entirely loathsome, was raised in a setting of prostitution himself, which invites our sympathy.

Harper's choice of subject is central to life in Pompeii. Sex work was certainly very widespread – it is estimated there were 35 brothels in Pompeii at that time – roughly one to every 75 male inhabitants (M. Beard, *Pompeii*, 2008, 233–9). This is hard to credit, but there are two factors which may help to explain it – one is that there was a blurred line between brothels and inns. The other is that there were many incoming males since Pompeii was a trading port at the junction of sea and river.

Harper's writing is not gratuitous and she holds back on details about the sex and violence, but inevitably, in a book about a sex worker, the threat of sexual violence is ever-present. I would certainly recommend this book to other teachers – Harper is very strong on the atmosphere of Pompeii – the sights and smells. (Although I did find one anachronism concerning smoke – see if you can spot it.) It is also a plausible consideration of how a woman might climb through the profession of sex work to gain a position of some wealth and power. In addition, it offers a chance for us to consider, at one remove, how many modern enslaved people are still ill-treated.

However, due to the subject matter of sex work and the setting in a brothel, I would definitely not recommend it to a pupil below sixth form age and even at that age, I would be extremely cautious.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000375

Stone Blind: Medusa's Story

Haynes (N.) Pp. 384, Mantle; Main Market edition, 2022. Hardcover, £18.99. ISBN: 978-1529061475

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In what has in recent years become fiction's most crowded genre, *Stone Blind* is the latest in a series of retellings of Greek myth for the modern audience. Although the list of authors who deal in