

The Golden Mean

Annabel Lyon talks to Lucinda Byatt about the balancing act of writing historical fiction

Annabel Lyon took the publishing world by storm when she dared to write a fictional account of one of the most tumultuous periods in Aristotle's life, the seven-year period he spent in Pella tutoring the teenager who would grow up to become one of the world's greatest conquerors, Alexander the Great. As if the meeting of these two titans of the ancient world were not exciting enough, the book goes a step further: written in the first person, the reader inhabits the mind of Aristotle, one of the most influential thinkers of all time. Published in Canada in 2009, *The Golden Mean* was shortlisted for three major book awards in Canada, even beating one of Lyon's literary idols, Alice Munro, to win the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize that year.

In August 2010 Annabel was invited to the Edinburgh International Book Festival, although she was still relatively unknown to readers this side of the Atlantic. But not for long: review followed review, in the *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *The*

Scotsman and many other papers. The culmination of this praise came in Hilary Mantel's words: 'I think this quietly ambitious and beautifully achieved novel is one of the most convincing historical novels I have ever read.'

I was intrigued enough to listen to Annabel at the EIBF and to talk to her afterwards. It was then that I suggested this interview although it has taken longer to appear in print than I had planned. Not because of any delay on her part: Annabel was admirably swift in replying to my questions and I would like to thank her for having taken time off writing the sequel.

I began by asking Annabel the most obvious question: why choose Aristotle? Of all the ancient historical figures a novelist might have selected, the father of Western philosophy is probably one of the most difficult. It takes a lot of courage to tackle an intellect of such pre-eminence, the first to draw the fundamental

distinction between fictional and factional modes of writing, between poetry and history.

"I studied philosophy as an undergraduate, and my two primary interests were the ancient Greeks and ethics. When you put those two together, the towering figure is Aristotle. He's someone whose work I came back to again and again, particularly the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I found the things he wrote about in that book – what does it mean to be a good person? how to live a good life? how to avoid extremes in one's behaviour? – were questions that still seemed relevant in my own time, even 2,300 years after he'd first written about them. I was afraid that outside of University philosophy and Classics departments people were forgetting who Aristotle was and how much he contributed to our intellectual heritage, and I thought fiction would be a good way of making him accessible to readers who didn't necessarily have any background in philosophy."

Philip's court in Macedon and Alexander's tutorship by Aristotle have been written about before, by no less an author than Mary Renault. Her work *Fire from Heaven* (1969) is a classic. In Renault's work, which is written in the third person, there is an incident with Leonidas when Alexander reveals his hidden menace, and that split-second loss of control which will turn him into a killer. What Annabel has achieved here is a turn of the tables: by using Aristotle as the narrator, we gain a privileged access to his world, and we also see Alexander through his eyes. I asked Annabel about Mary Renault, and also another extraordinary author, Robert Graves.

"I remember watching the BBC television adaptation of Graves's *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* books with my parents when I was still a child. I adored that series. I loved how accessible the characters were, how far from seeming high and mighty and noble and carved in marble, they seemed like real people—noble sometimes, petty sometimes—people you could talk to, imagine sharing a meal with. I suspect something of that spirit, that approach to history, stuck with me in the writing of my own novel. I wanted people to understand Aristotle as a man with a body as well as a mind, a man who ate breakfast and went to the bathroom and had sex and suffered depression and fathered children. I wanted to endow him with the full spectrum of humanity that I remembered from Graves's characters.

"I knew of Renault's Alexander trilogy, but purposely avoided reading *Fire From Heaven* (her novel dealing with the same time period as mine) until I'd finished my own, so I wouldn't be influenced by it. I'm so glad I did! That's an absolutely

wonderful novel, and I think if I had read it beforehand, I might never have persisted with *The Golden Mean*. It's hard to beat Renault at her best."

We moved onto unsteady ground for the next question, in which I tentatively wondered whether Annabel was writing for a female audience? It sounds a bald proposition but this work certainly raises questions which challenge our ways of thinking. Aristotle's views of women, and their place in that society, are totally alien, yet by recreating this world, historical fiction helps to set that chasm of understanding in context. In particular, I found the relationship between Alexander and his mother Olympias very painful to witness. And likewise, the relationship between Aristotle and his first wife. On the other hand, the slave Herpyllis is an extraordinary character and after Pythias' death, she becomes a faithful and more self-assured companion for Aristotle. However, Annabel quickly refuted the idea of writing solely with female readers in mind:

"I'm horrified, frankly, by the preconception that exists in some parts of the publishing world that historical fiction is for women, and therefore needs to be in some fundamental way about women, featuring taboo love stories and

such. This attitude patronizes male and female readers alike. (I actually received a rejection from one publisher on the grounds that the novel read as though it had been written by a man. How, I wonder, do they reject their male authors?) But I do understand what you're saying about the chasm in understanding, and the attendant risks of anachronism. It was a constant struggle not to impose my own 21st century, 1st world, feminist ideals on women who would most likely have been illiterate and (in the upper middle classes, certainly) virtual prisoners in their own homes. And one of the most difficult aspects of working on Aristotle was reconciling all his brilliance and innovation—first person we know of to do animal dissection, father of logic, brilliant

ethicist, first empirical scientist, and on and on—with the fact that he was a slave-owner and a raging misogynist. I could as a fiction writer squint my eyes (as it were), have him be really nice to his wife, and pretend that wasn't who he was; or I could accept him

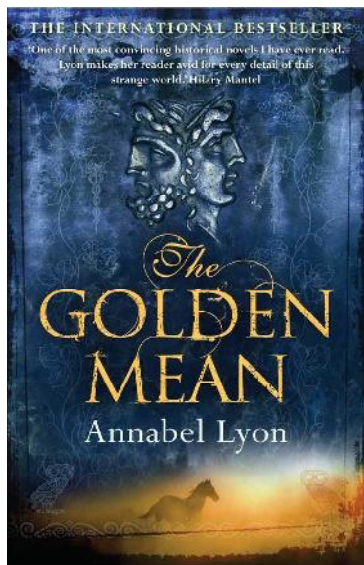
whole, with all his warts and horrors, and allow him to act less than kindly in the novel toward the women around him. I chose that route because it seemed more subtle, more interesting, and more true."



Many reviewers and other authors have noted how she captured the detail and atmosphere of life and events at that time so precisely and vividly, so I asked her about the process of researching the book.

“I had to learn about ancient medicine, clothing, food, music, armour, military tactics, funeral rites, theatre, agriculture, diplomacy, on and on.... One decision I made very early on was to adopt a very contemporary diction, to counteract the sense of distance and alienation a reader can feel when reading about this time. I made sure to use contemporary words – ‘horse’, for instance, instead of ‘mount’ or ‘charger’, and ‘dress’ instead of ‘chiton’ – so the reader would find the world realistic and familiar. I think a reader can relax when she can read ‘favourite green dress’ instead of ‘emerald green chiton of imported Egyptian linen’; she can vividly imagine the favourite green dress in her own closet and share a tighter emotional connection with the character that way. As you can probably tell, I’m not too interested in historical fiction as escapism! Basically, I wanted to write a modern novel that just happened to be set 2,300 years ago; but that wasn’t the most important thing about it.”

It almost seems a truism that a historical novelist needs to travel to the places where a novel is set, albeit several decades or centuries earlier, so I wondered whether Annabel had travelled to Greece while she was writing, or indeed since then, and if so, what impressions had been the main impressions of her visit.

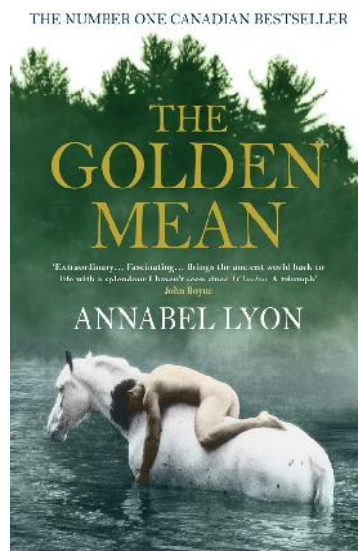


“I travelled to Athens in May 2009, after my own novel had been published, to research my next book. I couldn’t go sooner because I was having my kids (now 6 and 4) during the writing of the novel, and couldn’t leave them. I loved the place, and was struck by the very fluid co-existence of ancient and modern. Walking through a contemporary Athenian market, with its fruits and fish and pirated DVDs and whatnot, didn’t seem so very far from the ancient market with its fruit and fish and amphorae with favourite mythical scenes painted on them.”

A report was published in the United Kingdom in early September following a public inquiry into the horrendous mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by British soldiers in Basra. I felt that this ‘war madness’ – or ‘soldier’s heart’, as a character in the book calls it – comes out in Annabel’s portrait of Alexander. Shortly afterwards I read ‘Alexander’, her contribution to the anthology *Finding the Words* (see note 1), which confirmed this. Was this, I asked, an important aspect for her to explore? How did it influence the man who went on to become Alexander the Great?

“I started out wanting to write a novel

about Aristotle, and thought the boy Alexander would be a bit of an afterthought; Aristotle would teach him a few lessons (as history claims he did), and that would be that. But I quickly found that you can’t keep Alexander in a little box. He became an ever-greater presence in the novel, until by the end he was just about equal in importance to Aristotle in the narrative. I started out wanting to buck the trend of glamorizing Alexander, making him a sexy, hot-headed military genius. I decided, instead, that my Alexander would be a spoiled, bratty, arrogant pre-teen. But the more I learned about his adult life (relatively little is written about his childhood), the more he came to seem like a very damaged, suffering person. The ancient biographers, people like Arrian and Plutarch, describe an alcoholic given to fits of violent rage followed by black depressions, a man who couldn’t bring himself to leave the battlefield even when his army was on the verge of mutiny, a man who suffered increasingly from both megalomania and paranoia. These struck me as remarkably similar to the symptoms I was reading about in soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and I began to understand Alexander as someone suffering from what today we would call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Add to that the fact that he was trained as a child soldier, leading troops into battle at 16 (and presumably fighting and killing much younger than that), and suddenly the sexy hot-head becomes someone a lot darker and



more troubled, more troubling.”

The book is filled with highly original and evocative descriptions. Two that struck me in particular are Aristotle’s first encounter with Alexander while dissecting a chameleon, and his memory of Alexander first mounting Bucephalus: “the boy turns it toward the sun, blinding it, and it mounts easily ... From the warhorse’s back, the boy looks down at his father as though he’s coated in filth. That’s the coin I’ll carry longest in my pocket, the image I’ll worry over and over with my thumb.” Which was the scene, I asked, that had given her the most pleasure to write or left her with a lasting memory?

“My very favourite passage in the book is Aristotle’s description of his new-born daughter. I mentioned that I was struggling to write this novel through two pregnancies, and the way I managed was to set myself word quotas: 200 words every day, no matter what. I remember when my daughter was just a few months old, and I was suffering from post-partum depression, exhausted, really completely uninterested in ancient Greece, but I knew I had to write my 200 words to have a sense that I’d accomplished something with my day. So I wrote the only thing I could at that point, a description of what it felt like to touch my baby’s head. That made it into the book. I gave Aristotle my own children. I also dedicated the book to them, because a large part of what drove me was the thought that they could pursue an entire education, even get PhDs, without ever needing to read a word of Aristotle. I thought that was wrong. I want them to know, to remember, who Aristotle was.”

The cover artwork for the UK edition of the book is different to that used for some other languages. Was the

nudity deemed inappropriate for some editions?

“The UK hardcover edition is almost identical to the Canadian edition: it features a naked man draped over the back of a white horse. I think it’s beautiful; it evokes both sex and death, and is reminiscent of that beautiful ancient white marble statuary. Other countries have put a loincloth on the guy, or just gone with the horse theme and left the guy out altogether; I guess the man’s bare bum was too risqué. There was a fuss on BC ferries, in the Canadian province where I live, because their on-board bookstores banned the book because of the cover. Those shops have a mandate to feature BC authors, so the story got a bit of coverage in the local media; then suddenly the story got picked up around the world, and I was finding on-line articles on the New Yorker website, in South Africa, Australia, India, even Iran. It certainly wasn’t bad publicity!”

Annabel is already writing her next book, which is also set in this period. When I asked if she could give us a teaser of the subject-matter, she kindly agreed.

“I’m working on a sequel to *The Golden Mean*. It will feature Aristotle’s daughter as the main character. She would have been about 16 when he died. We know from Aristotle’s will (a real historical document) what his intentions for her were (a conventional marriage to her much older cousin). I’m going to begin the new novel with Aristotle’s death so that she is abruptly alone in the world, and must figure out how she’s going to live her life as an intelligent and resourceful young woman in an extremely restrictive society. I’m finding it a real challenge, for the reasons I mentioned above when

writing about women at that time. I have to stop myself from imposing a lot of anachronistic attitudes onto them, from assuming they must all have been clinically depressed because of their oppression, or that things couldn’t really have been that bad. The truth – the emotional truth, which is what interests me most – has to lie in between somewhere. What did it look like to be a happy woman at that time? What did a fulfilled female life look like? That’s what I’m struggling to understand now.”

Returning to that distinction made by Aristotle between poetry and history, two ways of writing about truth, one universal the other particular, I find it wonderful that Annabel naturally applies Aristotle’s idea of a golden mean, ‘the point of balance’, to her own writing and her search for the emotional truth. Hilary Mantel recently remarked that the only thing to be done with ‘the lost or the dead’ is to ‘write them into being’ (see note 2): Annabel Lyon’s book has certainly achieved this for Aristotle and Alexander. I very much look forward to enjoying a similar experience with young Pythias.

You can learn more about Annabel Lyon at www.annabellyon.blogspot.com.

Notes

1. Annabel Lyon, ‘Alexander’, appears in an anthology published to raise funds for PEN Canada: Jared Bland (ed.), *Finding the Words: Writers on Inspiration, Desire, War, Celebrity, Exile, and Breaking the Rules*, McLelland & Stewart 2011. Available online at www.cbc.ca/books/2011.

2. *Hilary Mantel: A Culture Show Special*, BBC Two, Saturday, 17 September 2011.