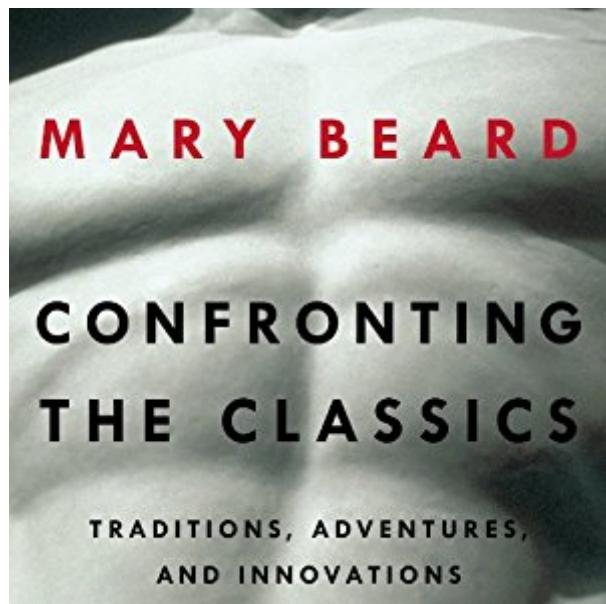


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Confronting The Classics: Traditions, Adventures And Innovations



Synopsis

One of the world's leading historians provides a revolutionary tour of the Ancient World, dusting off the classics for the twenty-first century. Mary Beard, drawing on thirty years of teaching and writing about Greek and Roman history, provides a panoramic portrait of the classical world, a book in which we encounter not only Cleopatra and Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Hannibal, but also the common people - the millions of inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the slaves, soldiers, and women. How did they live? Where did they go if their marriage was in trouble or if they were broke? Or, perhaps just as important, how did they clean their teeth? Effortlessly combining the epic with the quotidian, Beard forces us along the way to reexamine so many of the assumptions we held as gospel - not the least of them the perception that the Emperor Caligula was bonkers or Nero a monster. With capacious wit and verve, Beard demonstrates that, far from being carved in marble, the classical world is still very much alive.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this book very much, but anyone tempted to buy it should understand what it is: a collection of review essays on classical figures and topics, sensibly organized both chronologically and thematically -- but it is emphatically NOT itself a history of the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. Those "confronting the classics" are the authors of the books that Beard is reviewing, and throughout Beard reviews them with an eye to their adequacy or otherwise as historians. So the book isn't history -- it's ABOUT history and what it is to try to do history well. That means that it's

about how people handle evidence, especially the very fragmentary evidence that we have from so long ago. There are documents, there are artifacts, and there are the results of archeological activity. How do we, in the 21st century, put such stuff together to tell a convincing (aspiring to "true") story about Octavius or Alexander or Boadicea? It's tempting to say that the ancient world had its historians too -- Tacitus, Suetonius, Thucydides et. al. -- but they wrote decades or even centuries after the events they relate, so they have to be looked at with pretty cool scrutiny. So -- to sum up, a general reader who is interested in history and in the problems of writing history will find this book accessible and enjoyable. And you learn things! It's something to know that we know quite a bit about Augustus's life before he took care of Antony and Cleopatra but very little about the four decades of his rule as emperor. Beard speculates interestingly on why that is so. In general, we get a sense of the fragments of knowledge that seem beyond dispute and then are brought face to face with the obvious difficulties of "connecting the dots," as we would now say. Beard also has quite a bit to say about modern representations of historical figures in popular culture ("Cleopatra," "I, Claudius," etc.) and she ties in her discussions of these with the critiques of the usually more serious scholarship represented by the books under review in each chapter. Her style is direct and engaging -- she doesn't assume a lot of prior knowledge on her readers' parts -- and she usually finds the places in the books she reviews where the writer makes plausible connections and claims, but most importantly she has a great eye for the implausible, and she is very clear about when and why we should find this or that claim about Nero, Caligula, Julius Caesar, Cicero and others questionable. And she doesn't seem to have an agenda -- she's not pushing her view of the "truth" about Alexander or Cleopatra or whomever; she's talking about how fascinatingly elusive these figures and their cultures remain. Recommended for the critical reader!

Let's be clear about what this book is to avoid untoward expectations. This is a collection of some 30 book reviews written by Mary Beard since 1990, although most are more recent, and which already have appeared in the Times Literary Supplement, the London Book Review and other general but highbrow periodicals. They cover a wide range of Ancient (Greek and Roman) history and culture subjects, most of which have been thoroughly treated over the last 200 years in innumerable publications. Beard's virtue is to always provide some added value, some fresh insight or viewpoint. So this book will probably provide greatest pleasure to those who already have some familiarity with the subjects treated.

Mary Beard is a tough reviewer of scholarship in her area of expertise--the Classics. This is a book

of reviews of recent and not-so-recent scholarship in the world of Greek and Roman history. The first half is excellent for anyone interested in the Classics, giving interesting commentary on the background of the authors as well as the history or culture they are addressing. The second half is a bit more esoteric, focusing on less well-known subjects and historiography which won't be of interest to everyone. Throughout, however, her prose is witty, biting and without guile. Hardly anyone gets off without a scratch or bruise or two.

This is a review of contemporary works by classicist Mary Beard who comes across as a mixture of Indiana Jones and Indiana's father. She moves effortlessly between modern accounts of the ancient world and primary sources like Livy, Cicero, Polybius, Herodotus and Thucydides the later of whom we learn wrote barely intelligible Greek. She does not hesitate to slap down weak scholarship while lauding high scholarly writing.

Although the Romans reportedly abhorred monarchy, they now have a Queen of the Classics in Mary Beard. Ms. Beard is not sparing in her criticisms and one gets the sense that she believes that she is the last word on most things ancient. Nevertheless, she obviously knows her stuff, but more so, endlessly cautions that, very often in the classics, the story is far more than the evidence that supports it. I believe that the most we can know, particularly here, is that we don't know. Humans typically are impatient to find facts, and in this field, that is very dangerous. I was, at first, disappointed to learn that so much ancient art is in fact reproduction. After going to Pompeii last year, I read Ms. Beard's book on that subject and was again disappointed knowing that perhaps something I touched there was not actually there in 79 AD. But if that is the truth then so it should be told. I am reminded of a talk that Kennedy biographer Robert Dallek gave where he described a young Vassar student who had a long affair with Kennedy while he was in office. A young woman asked him why he had to say that and apparently taint the image she wanted to harbor of him. Because it was the truth, he said. No more reason necessary.

Great intro to those seeking an easy to read yet erudite introduction to the classics by Mary Beard. These essays cover Nero, Caesar, Asterix, Homer, movies and plays about the classics. You'll learn and be entertained at the same time. The essays on Nero and Asterix are by themselves worth the price of the book.

I like Mary Beard. She's not your typical classicist and she cuts straight to the chase in her

articles. She writes clearly and she makes interesting people and places you might never have heard of, since there are many obscure corners in Classical Studies. She also challenges some of the standard lines eg that Empress Livia was evil (as portrayed by Robert Graves and the BBC in I, Claudius). Also an interesting article about Cleopatra whom we all think we know something about - and most of which is Hollywood fantasy. I've not quite finished reading the book, but the quality is very even so far and I expect it will stay that way.

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