

protagonists face, with unequal amounts of courage and fortitude. The dialogue is quirkily modern at times but seems to fit. Aristotle is a very strange man who clearly suffers from bipolar syndrome, with the “depressive” part more present than the “manic” part, to his dismay. He wants nothing more than to be alone with his books, or out collecting specimens he can cut up and document, yet he’s always being driven into situations that require human contact, such as marriage and teaching. Alexander, on the other hand, knows he will be king one day, and chafes at any restraint; he wants to be with the army, at war. The prince who will be the conqueror of a huge part of the ancient world is passing strange, almost but not quite sociopathic, but also, as a boy, vulnerable and lonely.

The “philosophical” musings in the book are, in my opinion, cursory and not well developed, despite what the book jacket says. There are recognizable Aristotelian ideas, mainly as they contrast with Plato’s teachings, and I think the author tries to connect them to the reality of her characters’ world, but not always successfully. I have to say that the reading was hard going — at times the atmosphere was crude and unpleasant, and overall, it was not an enjoyable book, but it was very interesting and ultimately, I found it worthwhile.

Mary F. Burns

#### THE WEDDING SHROUD: A Tale of Early Rome

Elizabeth Storrs, Pier 9, 2010, AU\$32.95, pb, 478pp, 9781741967906

Born of a patrician mother and a wealthy plebeian father, Caecilia is no ordinary Roman citizen, but a product of two conflicting worlds. After losing both her parents, Caecilia finds a tenuous place in her uncle’s household. There she is strengthened by her cousin Marcus’s friendship and the first love of a young Roman soldier, Drusus. Yet she is never quite at home.

When Caecilia is wedded to an Etruscan nobleman, Vel Mastarna, a treaty is signed. Caecilia is to be a symbol, her marriage a link between Vel and the fledgling Republic of Rome. Though Caecilia’s place in her uncle’s household seemed fragile, it is nothing compared to the uncertainty she faces in her new Etruscan home — a place where gods, customs, loves and loyalties are strange and conflicting. Who can she trust? How does she love? Where does she really belong?

In *The Wedding Shroud*, Elizabeth Storrs gives us a complex heroine, grappling with issues of spirituality and culture in ways that are non-cliché and refreshing; a hero who is battle-scarred and unattractive yet somehow compelling; and a glimpse of two ancient cultures with their delicate balance of gender, religion and morality. If at times this reader struggled to empathise with the heroine’s loyalty to Rome or to fully comprehend the influence of her belief system, it is not so much a fault of the novel but a mark of its ambitious scope — the difficulty of portraying deeply held religious belief in a post-modern world. Yet, Storrs

somehow manages to pull it off.

From the moment I stepped under the orange veil to the last roll of the dice, I found myself wanting more of her world, to walk with her characters and to immerse myself in their lives, if only for a time.

Elizabeth Jane

## | 1st century |

#### ROMAN GAMES

Bruce Macbain, Poisoned Pen, 2010, \$24.95, hb, 261pp, 9781590587751

Often the suspect in Roman mystery novels is a slave, so the detective must work to prove someone else did it, or the law will demand that the entire household be executed. Here the investigator is Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, known to posterity as Pliny the Younger. Pliny receives aid from another figure from Roman literature, Marcus Valerius Maritalis, whose connections on the seamy side of Roman life complement Pliny’s access in high places. Martial has few concerns beyond finding a source for his next free meal, a source which turns out to be Pliny. Pliny works on finding the murderer, but he is also involved in impregnating his young wife and maintaining his integrity in a corrupt system. The mysterious presence of a steward named Stephanus with his arm in a sling signals a connection the household of Domitian where an assassination plot is unfolding.

Latin words such as pica (a morbid condition thought to accompany pregnancy) or thermae (large public baths) are sprinkled throughout the text and defined in a glossary. The social background is authentic, and the fictional events are consistent with the known historical framework. Solving the murder is only incidental in this debut novel subtitled “A Plinius Secundus Mystery.” It will be interesting to see what other corpses turn up and what steps Pliny takes to solve their murders. Recommended.

James Hawking

#### THE CURSE-MAKER

Kelli Stanley, Minotaur, 2011, \$24.99US/C28.99, hb, 300pp, 9780312654191

Roman Britain, Bath, Aquae Sulis where the goddess sends forth warm, healing waters. Our sleuth, former legionary and doctor Arcturus, whom readers met in Stanley’s award-winning *Nox Dormienda*, and his lovely wife Gwyna are having marital problems Arcturus is helpless to explain. They travel from their home in Londinium to Aquae Sulis for a vacation. They haven’t even descended from their horses when they are greeted by a body floating in the curative waters — quite dead. The chase is afoot.

PR material makes no secret that *The Curse-Maker* is Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, a tale of Western U.S. small-town corruption “in an ancient setting,” a “Roman noir.” I cannot agree that this is as dark or as powerful as Hammett’s 1929 classic.

Sympathetic women and their problems, for one thing, will make this more palatable for the female pleasure reader. Hammett’s hard-boiled language often scalds, and Stanley’s voice does not reach his levels. Some gaps in logic, too, seem to have been created by cutting to attain a publisher’s word limit. But reaching for the classic (in both the 1929 and 1st-century senses) works well in other ways. We’re treated to riveting, spot-on images page after page by an author who clearly knows her stuff.

Ann Chamberlin

## | 2nd century |

#### CAVEAT EMPTOR (US) / RUSO AND THE RIVER OF DARKNESS (UK)

Ruth Downie, Bloomsbury USA, 2011, \$25.00/C\$31.00, hb, 352pp, 9781596916081 / Penguin, 2011, £8.99, pb, 464pp, 9780141036946

The fourth novel in a series of historical mysteries set in the second century A.D., *Caveat Emptor* takes place in Roman Britain. The hero of the series, physician Gaius Petreius Ruso, is recently married. Seeking only a peaceful life, he becomes embroiled in the search for a tax collector who has gone missing, and then the plot thickens. Ruso is a good-hearted man but not extraordinarily brave. But though the situation becomes increasingly treacherous he is unable to extricate himself, and the suspense mounts.

The background and historical detail seem authentic. There is a good deal of dry humor. The characters are vividly drawn, though some of them may strike the reader as a bit too modern in outlook. The dialogue often has a contemporary flavor which personally I found jarring. All and all, I often had a difficult time believing I was in Roman Britain, but I still enjoyed the story.

Phyllis T. Smith

#### THE LEGION

Simon Scarrow, Headline, 2010, £18.99, hb, 369pp, 9780755353743

Egypt. A group of renegade gladiators led by the psychotic Ajax, posing as Roman soldiers, are causing dissent and stirring rebellion, threatening the stability of the whole Roman Empire. Acting Prefect Cato and Centurion Macro are charged by the Governor of Egypt with tracking and defeating the renegade before the whole province erupts into revolt. Before they can complete their task, a rebel Nubian army invades. The renegade gladiators join forces with the rebels Cato and Macro, finding themselves joining the Twenty Second Legion, an untried and inexperienced force to face the combined enemy forces who are hell-bent on the destruction of everything Roman.

This is the latest in the successful Roman series featuring Cato and Macro. The story thunders along, taking the reader on a rollercoaster ride of revenge, military incompetence, betrayal and heat-sapping physical and mental endurance. It is well-researched, with totally believable characters, and