



Family Favourites

Alfred Duggan

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This is the story of Elagabalus, named after the Syrian Sun god and sky-stone. At thirteen years he led his army victoriously against the might of the Emperor of Rome. He was a god-like young man: strong, beautiful, charming and beloved of his soldiers. Once established as Emperor though, his family sought to influence him, but he rejected them, and they, like the Senate, became his deadly enemies. Through the story of this unusual and outrageous man we see the background of third century AD Roman Empire--the power of family and dynastic ties, and the struggle between autocratic ruler and his advisers.

Family Favourites Details

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Ozymandias says

Story: 7 (Strong character focus but drifts after midpoint and ends suddenly)

Characters: 8 (Brings life to historic figures with surprising sympathy)

Accuracy: 8 (Mixes eras frequently, but excellent for the time)

When starting this book I was expecting an outrageous and indignant story about the decline of Roman values and the rise of a degenerate oriental despotate. Instead, the book is largely a peon to Elagabalus and a critique of, if anything, the intolerance and increasingly unequal practices of the Roman state. Elagabalus (or Varius rather) has long been an infamous figure, though he's never reached the name brand recognition of Nero or Caligula (or even Commodus). Despite what is often shown, emperors were more often classified as "bad" for private vices than public cruelty. A certain amount of cruelty is permitted in an emperor; immodesty and undignified behavior is not. And despite the vitriol of ancient historians (and unsupported claims of behavior such as human sacrifice) Varius can rarely be shown as a killer. Few named victims appear in accounts (a sure sign of rumor and innuendo) and those that do appear show up alive and well under his successor. In other words, he was despised pretty much solely for his private life, which never really hurt anybody. But having seen enough depictions of LGBT figures in '50s cinema and lit I assumed that this was enough to tar him mercilessly as a decadent and murderous tyrant (homosexuality was, after all, only a symptom of deeper moral laxity and ungovernable, therefore cruel, passions). I'm pleased to say that isn't the case here.

This account is intent on being scrupulously fair (perhaps even excessively so), but what does that mean for the story's interest value? After all, shocking and outrageous behavior is a popular trope in Roman fiction (see *Child of the Sun* for this with Varius) and it's a lot more fun than a restrained take. The novel's approach is to give us an outsider to the whole affair, a praetorian from Gaul called Duratius, as our narrator and guide. Duratius is in the thick of things from the beginning, arriving in Antioch just as the emperor Caracalla is assassinated and serving as a regular guardsman under his successor Macrinus before leading the defection to Varius. From then on he becomes one of Varius' personal guards and a loyal (if cautious) supporter of the new regime. I expected his opinion of Varius as a manly warrior to sour as the boy's vices became clear, but again the novel surprised me. Duratius doesn't approve of Varius' behavior, and thus Duggan gets to have his cake and eat it too, but also sees that it's essentially harmless compared to earlier emperors' (even good ones) excesses. And so rather than a moral treatise, the novel falls into something like a Boy's Own adventure novel.

Varius himself is an appealing character. He's an intelligent boy, capable of acts of great courage and maturity. We're introduced to him in the middle of battle, where he appears heroic and very much a leader of men. This shows him as the soldiers would have first seen him, as the "son" of Caracalla (though I can't see the resemblance myself, much as I love both his smirking visage and Caracalla's scowl) and heir to the fierce Severan dynasty, rather than anything we're accustomed to. Yet it doesn't seem out of place with his Syrian upbringing, which sees him dancing publicly and comfortably wearing makeup and absurdly luxurious and (to Roman minds) effeminate clothing. Such clothing and behavior can't help but rub the noble Roman senators the wrong way. Again to the novel's credit, this is not presented as depravity but as the perspective of a different culture. Indeed, Duratius is greatly surprised to realize just how accustomed he has become to such behavior when he returns to Rome and sees how shocking it is to everyone there. Yet this is never presented as a corruption of morals or decline in his moral character.

In Rome, Varius' more martial virtues are not apparent and, despite an oath to do no harm to anybody, his good nature is held back by a certain immaturity and lack of seriousness. He can discipline himself enough to

keep up a public front, but with unclear obligations and a disinterest in the minutiae of governing he naturally grows bored quickly. Who can blame him for seeking out chariot racing and easy sex? This is part of a broader curiosity that sadly never gets directed towards more productive ends. "My aim is to taste every experience open to mankind before I am called to join my predecessors among the gods." His religious practices are the only real work he's interested in and those involve what the Senate would call inappropriate displays (such as dancing) and the needless antagonism of existing cults. This, more than generally tolerated sexual proclivities, is the real stumbling block for his reign. He seems in many ways an ordinary boy: a bit lazy, a bit prone to sensual pleasure and sports, and possessed of a natural chafing at his elders' rules. He's lovable but not practical, and his childish defiance of Senators in the form of public humiliations and practical jokes seems more sure to turn them against him than some good honest old-fashioned purges. A nice kid, but not really one fit to be emperor, and the tragedy is that he doesn't recognize it.

Duratus is a good character as well. He's a career soldier with a sense of honor whose family was killed in the last civil war. This has not unnaturally given him a healthy distaste for such conflicts. He's not ambitious, not greedy, generally trustworthy, and a bit of a stick in the mud, at least according to Varius. These qualities make him a useful servant for the entire family, providing Varius with some needed masculine advice in a court dominated by women, serving as a barometer for the loyalty of the army, and a useful go-between for all parties. More importantly for the novel, he's also got a cynical wit that suits the work without feeling overly anachronistic. I particularly enjoyed his description of the appearance of a comet as an omen of regime change: "it was not a very bright comet, but then Macrinus was not a very great emperor." Cheeky bugger.

In terms of accuracy the novel is generally excellent. I've read Duggan's *The Little Emperors* and found it hitting every cringeworthy stereotype of the later empire, which I'm very glad to find is not the case here. Severus' reforms are treated as problematic but I think that's fair enough, even if the reality was a bit more complex than this makes out. Dio himself gave Severus' dying words as "support the army, ignore everyone else," so the conclusion is not anachronistic. On less sturdy ground is his frequent mentioning of Roman citizenship as an elite status. Caracalla had just granted the citizenship to the whole empire so this was a meaningless factor, and it's odd that the book would miss that when it's one of the two things that Caracalla is most famous for (the other being the murder of his brother and co-ruler Geta in his mother's arms). He also seems to buy into Rostovtzeff's thesis that the crisis of the third century was caused by an alliance between peasant farmers (the proletariat) and the army against the wealthy city denizens (the bourgeoisie). Even at the time this conclusion to an otherwise excellent work was derided. Rostovtzeff fled Russia during the Revolution and this, rather than anything the sources say, is clearly the source of his conclusions. But in fairness, the work was still relatively recent when this book was written. Overall it does a good job at presenting Roman society in the early third century.

I was pleasantly surprised by this book and would recommend it to anyone interested in Roman emperors, the Roman army, LGBT fiction, or historical novels in general. The third century is a bit limited for fiction anyway (though that may be changing now with *Dark North* and the *Warrior of Rome/Throne of the Caesars* and *Agent of Rome* series, all written within the last decade), so it's good to see a novel covering it well without falling into the pitfalls of decline and corruption.

Anthony Peter says

Thoroughly enjoyable read. I read 'Three's Company' quite a long time ago, and remember it as quite heavy going, though I can't recall why - possibly because I found the politicking hard to follow - but I liked the idea that a lesser known character in Roman history, Lepidus, had a chance to put his point of view.

Similarly in 'Family Favourites'. Elagabalus, the Syrian Emperor, gets a chance to enjoy the limelight, as does the soldier-in-the-street, the fictional centurion narrator, the Gaul, Julius Duratius, who becomes the Emperor's personal bodyguard. The pleasure of the novel lies partly in the sensational nature of the story (openly gay boy-Emperor fails to manage Rome and the army, and is murdered by his family circle), partly in its lively retelling of history (the facts of which I supposed to be at least largely true as Duggan was, I presume, a classical scholar), and partly in its voicing of what, in 1960, must have been outrageously liberal views about homosexuality. The novel was first published by Faber, and then in 1963, by Penguin. I wonder if Faber thought they would get away with it (in the same year as we had R vs Penguin Books over 'Lady Chatterley') as the novel would simply be regarded as 'historical' and conform to the popular idea of Rome as a place of orgiastic excess which everyone of course knew and accepted was wicked and revolting and morally disgusting etc etc. Penguin, in 1963, however, might have added it to their list to capitalise on the new found freedoms in publishing achieved by their having won the 'Lady Chatterley' case.

That aside, the story is detailed and pacy and I found the politics easy enough to follow. The rivalry in the court among the Augusta (Elagabalus' grandmother), the Clarissima (Elagabalus' mother), and Mamea (Elagabalus' aunt) and her son, Alexianus (Elagabalus' successor) were consistently entertaining. I found the sibling rivalry of the sisters particularly interesting, the hedonistic complacency of the Clarissima dramatically contrasted with the intelligent plotting of Mamea. The detailing of Roman life - the army and its logistics, the Empire, the corn supply, the games, the Emperor's excesses, the internationalism of the Empire, tax grievances, banking - is deftly delivered, though I found at times that the narrative voice did not mask well enough the history lesson the author was offering. The characterisation is straightforward and characters are well distinguished from each other in a way that makes for a very satisfying drama. All in all, an engaging and rewarding read.

Erik Graff says

Well-researched, well-written and with a most peculiar subject, Family Favourites is the story of Elagabalus, the Syrian teen emperor of Rome during the third century. Not one of the great emperors, Elagabalus was certainly one of the most exotic.

Having loved Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in high school, this literary exposition of one of Rome's many misfortunes was a delight. I wish someone of Duggan's ability would take on all the later emperors.

Megan says

This book was quite good -- I only wanted more. Elagabalus is a fascinating figure and the wheelings and dealings of his court were interesting. The narrator was a little too forgiving of some of his eccentricities (particularly the naked girls made to draw carriages), but this did give some insight on how the mob may have felt about their boyish emperor.

Chrisl says

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elagabalus>

220 AD - The Roman army controlled the empire. When popular with soldiers Caracalla was assassinated, the Praetorians selected an army lawyer to lead them ... then quickly rebelled to award the emperor role to a 13-year old Syrian. We learn about the events from the displaced son of a minor landholding family in France. This narrator learned to read and write before being orphaned in a localized civil war battle. He joins the legions and has just become a Praetorian and marched to Syria. Duggan creates a role of advisor for Duratius.

(In Gillian Bradshaw's Dark North, Caracalla is a character, too.)
Dark North

Quoting from the Prologue

"It is really most extraordinary that I am alive, and as far as I can see reasonably safe, at the age of forty-five. All the same, a few years ago I had to make a fresh start, in a land where my past would be unknown. I have settled down here, in northern Britain, just fifteen miles within the Wall. The climate is horrible, but in other respects the situation suits me. I live in the province, but four hours' walking will get me outside it; and if the police should try to follow me, well, the auxiliaries in the forward blockhouses stand in some awe of a veteran from the regular army; with any luck they would cover my tracks.

"So here I am, a genuine time-expired Praetorian with an honourable discharge ... The oxen and packhorses I breed for the army bring in quite a decent income ...

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p98 - quoting

"The lady Soaemias spoke: 'The Augusta is of course the head of our family. But I think, dear, you should also point out to this gallant soldier the divine protector who maintains our greatness.'

"Of course I must. How could I have forgotten? Duratius, will you now worship Elagabalus, who has fostered our family for countless generations and today has given me the mastery of the world? You worship him by kissing the ground before his pedestal. There is no need for you to sacrifice. He and I arranged this morning that every man killed today would be devoted to him as a sacrifice.'

"I knelt down to kiss the ground as directed. I was glad that I had been ordered to perform the rite in private, for such worship of a bit of black stone might be considered comical by the army at large. As I got up again I looked closely at the new guardian of the Republic. Elagabalus was perky and perhaps benignant, an erect phallus gleaming with perfumed oil; a wreath of fresh roses gave him a rakish air. As a god he would appeal to young boys, but I felt that Rome under his guardianship might be in for some surprising experiences.

"Isn't he a beauty?' cooed the Emperor. 'He has done everything for my family ... Do you think, Grandma, that it would please him if I were to rule in his name? Shall I call myself the Emperor High Priest of Elagabalus?'

... "That's it. Someone put it into writing. The god and I shall reign jointly, under the single name of the Emperor Elagabalus. Which of us has inspired any particular decree will be known only to the god and myself."

Jane says

Family favourites is definitely unusual: the story of Roman Emperor Elagabalus, one of Rome's most outlandish and bizarre rulers, in the 3rd century AD. I did some research on him after I read the book. Historically, Elagabalus really was that unbelievable and cruel; Nero, Caligula, and Commodus are just better known. The purported memoirs of one of his Praetorians tells how the soldier interacted with him during his rise and fall. According to Duggan's 'Historical note': the soldier, Duratius, is the only completely fictional character in the book. I loved Duggan's wry cynicism and snatches of dry and sardonic humor.

Eddie Clarke says

I've not heard of this author before: apparently he started writing relatively late in life & then produced about two books a year for just over a decade. Family Favourites was one of his later books, published 1960. Alfred Duggan (born Alfredo, he was an Argentinian born to enormous wealth) was a friend of Evelyn Waugh & was well-regarded (and best-selling) in his day. Some of his books are still in print today.

I came to this book through my interest in the Roman emperor Elagabalus, one of the most outrageous & exotic of them all. Duggan handles the story well; for the most part this is brilliantly imagined and convincing, with good characterisation and pacing, only losing a little in the very end, although I did enjoy the vicious irony & dirty power play of the imperial schemers at the crisis. The story is narrated by the emperor's quite prim and proper bodyguard Duratius, in every respect a straight foil for Elagabalus.

From what I can gather, Duggan was straight. He was also writing pre-Lady Chatterly and when homosexuality was illegal in the UK. So I thought his treatment of Elagabalus's homosexuality was very enlightened for its time (The novel was written after the Wolfenden report came out; it could be seen as the author's contribution to the debate. As with the novels of Mary Renault, the classical period setting renders the homosexual content less threatening). Of course at this time graphic sex scenes would not appear in literature; but as the narrator is the Emperor's close personal bodyguard he gets intimate insight into Elagabalus's private life and enough is conveyed for the reader to easily fill in the blanks. As Elagabalus is the hereditary high priest of a Syrian sun god, Duggan has huge fun camping up the outrageous religious rites to the extreme - almost to the point they are more shocking than explicit sex would have been.

Duratius the bodyguard frequently asserts the emperor is entitled to love whoever he wants, and whilst his sexuality is controversial in Rome it has nothing whatsoever to do with his final downfall. In this respect I think Duggan deviates somewhat from the ancient historians, who were mostly aghast at Elagabalus's sex life.

The claim on the blurb of this paperback edition that Elagabalus accepted "women as a voice in government" is misleading. Whilst Elagabalus's female relatives take up the boring duties of government the emperor himself can't be bothered with, there are scenes of horrific misogyny in this book.

S.J. Arnott says

Alfred Duggan is one of my favourite historical authors. Most of his works are on an early medieval or Roman theme and this book is one of the latter - a history of the bizarre Elagabalus, a Syrian priest who ruled Rome as its teenage emperor around AD220. The story is told through the eyes of a Roman legionary who

becomes Elagabalus' confidant after helping him rise to power. Duggan sifts through the rumour and legend that surrounds the eccentric emperor and presents us with a reasoned account of his life that is probably as close to the truth that anyone is likely to get.

Rosemary says

This was very good. I didn't finish *The Blood of Caesar* by Albert A. Bell Jr or *The Silver Pigs* by Lindsey Davis as I found both to be modern plots awkwardly transplanted into a Roman setting.

By contrast this author smoothly combines scholarship with historical imagination, as *The Times* rightly observes. The narrator was likeable and believable.

Feliks says

Surprisingly, this obscure book one of the most memorable of all works I have ever read in the genre of historical fiction. Its just a bizarre and vivid tale written with style and conviction. Characters which leap off the page. Its man's historical fiction on display here--although Mary Renault is wonderful; this stuff by Duggan is filled with real menace and real excitement. Violent and ruthless. He's got sharply-drawn descriptions of warfare; campaigns; marches; equipment--Roman battles as told from the perspective of a Roman soldier! You just can't beat it. Huge treat. I've got to pursue his writings further.
