



The Virtues of War: A Novel of Alexander the Great

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I have always been a soldier. I have known no other life. So begins Alexander's extraordinary confession on the eve of his greatest crisis of leadership. By turns heroic and calculating, compassionate and utterly merciless, Alexander recounts with a warrior's unflinching eye for detail the blood, the terror, and the tactics of his greatest battlefield victories. Whether surviving his father's brutal assassination, presiding over a massacre, or weeping at the death of a beloved comrade-in-arms, Alexander never denies the hard realities of the code by which he lives: the virtues of war. But as much as he was feared by his enemies, he was loved and revered by his friends, his generals, and the men who followed him into battle. Often outnumbered, never outfought, Alexander conquered every enemy the world stood against him—but the one he never saw coming. . . .

The Virtues of War: A Novel of Alexander the Great Details

Date : Published September 27th 2005 by Bantam (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9780553382051

Author : Steven Pressfield

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, War, Military Fiction

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Iset says

I actually liked this one more than I thought I would. I started reading it coming off the back of having read Mary Renault's excellent Alexander trilogy not long before, which, for me, is the definitive Alexander fiction, and I went into this book feeling dubious as to whether it could compare. It couldn't, but it wasn't all that bad. I certainly enjoyed it more than I did Steven Pressfield's *Last of the Amazons*, which was confusing, anachronistic, and had huge plotholes.

The voice of Alexander is the crucial factor in any novel tackling this historic person, presenting the author with the challenge of trying to capture his quixotic charisma, unusual intelligence, and powerful emotions. To my surprise, Pressfield actually does a reasonable job here... sort of. Let me explain. Other reviewers have praised the strength of descriptions of war in this book, and they're dead on. The entire book reads like a series of anecdotes about battle, war, and the lessons Alexander has learned about being a commander. And it's written well. The battle scenes are clearly described, if, at times, occasionally heavy on technical detail, and the anecdotes and snippets of wisdom are easily readable and page-turning. Alexander's words of wisdom feel true to the historical figure's intelligence and battle experience – so his "voice" did feel plausible here.

However, that's all we get. The novel is very narrowly focused on just this one aspect, on the sequence of just one particular sort of event. I felt like Alexander the general was here... but Alexander the ruler, the dreamer, the man, was oddly absent. His charisma, personal dynamism, and human challenges felt like they were missing. I went through it at a good pace, enjoying the story, thinking it was quite well-written – but also missing those aspects that had been omitted. For me, the book didn't capture the essence of Alexander, it just captured one strand in the essence of Alexander. Good, but it's not going to supplant Mary Renault's trilogy any time soon.

6 out of 10

Artemas says

Steven Pressfield does it again with this haunting tale of Alexander the Great. I believe this book was released the same year as the *Alexander* movie starring Collin Farrell, and fans of the movie would probably enjoy this book as well. Both painted a vivid picture of Alexander's life through a brilliant narrative. Some of the battle sequences were written as if Pressfield was sitting astride his own mount on the periphery of the battlefield. Spectacular technical description was combined flawlessly with gruesome action.

*The sarissa's song is a sad song
He pipes it soft and low.
I would ply a gentler trade, says he,
But war is all I know.*

In case you are curious as to what a "sarissa" is, the link below shows one in all its glory and illustrates why Alexander's army was so terrible to face on the field. The Macedonian and his sarissa are on the left*

<http://slinging.org/forum/yabbfiles/A...>

Pick this one up if you enjoy fiction involving history, war, military life, biography, philosophy ... bah just read it!

Five stars all the way.

Get your copy here: <https://amzn.to/2juW3n9>

Cassandra Kay Silva says

"I am the living soul of the army. As blood flows from the lion's heart to its limbs, so courage flows from me to my countrymen. A million men stand in arms against us. I will rout them by my will alone."

That line absolutely captures the feeling of Alexander in this novel. Even though this work was not as good as Gates of Fire it is still an outstanding work. Reading it alongside another author's rendition of Alexander, this work breathes fire. Pressfield has an absolute masculine energy that is enthralling. I can't get enough of his writing. I wish he would have taken on more with this book, and I do acknowledge that the Alexander that is portrayed may not be historically accurate in character, but man he is epic! He has some serious moments in this book that are so overpowering in scope. The battles are beautiful and frightful all at the same time. The descriptions are vivid and lively. The pacing is perfect. It is always a joy to read Pressfield's work.

Tanya Tosheva says

I dropped the book after reading more than 300 pages of it, which is not something I do often. It was, however, in turns frustrating and boring, and - after Gaugamela - I couldn't even bring myself to care if and how Alexander defeats Porus. [Spoiler alert: Alexander died without ever losing a battle.] When I say the book was boring, however, I don't mean boring in the sense of ponderous, verbose or over-descriptive. On the contrary, "The Virtues of War" was awfully concise. To the point of being superficial. But more on that later.

Here are the reasons I think "The Virtues of War" fails both as a historical account and as a fictional novel.

1. **Alexander the Great.** When you hear that name, what do you think of? I won't even bother guessing. The name's so famous that you could associate it with practically anything, from actual historical events to kitchen aprons. But if you've read anything about the man, you will not be able to suspend your disbelief at his characterization in this book for long. Pressfield's Alexander is a humble, benevolent, unassuming guy whose ambitions don't go beyond good soldering and who - as he'll tell you on the very first pages of the book - ascribes his success entirely to the men he's leading. Yeah, that sounds *exactly* like the man who believed himself to be (the son of) a god, forced his lifelong companions to prostrate themselves before him, burned down Persepolis after getting drunk at a feast and may or may not have murdered his own father. Pressfield's Alexander doesn't seem to suffer from megalomania, paranoia or delusions of grandeur, is strictly heterosexual (bordering on asexual, actually... yes, we're still talking about Alexander the Great) and loves people (in a platonic way) more than Jesus Christ (allegedly) does.

I can't say I'm too impressed by this version of Alexander but, in the end, it wasn't what made me drop the

book. Let's continue to...

2. **The rest of the characters.** Or lack thereof. Yes, there were some names thrown around. Some of the names even said some words. Some of the names even did some things that could be considered heroic. But, in the end, that's all the names were. Names. No characterization of anyone whatsoever, beyond psychical descriptions (even those were sparse) and accounts of martial prowess. I can't say the characters are two-dimensional because that implies that they *have* some dimensions and are not just names repeated often on a page. Pressfield is so economic in his characterization that the reader is left not caring what happens to any of the names at all.

3. Failing number three is, surprisingly for anyone familiar with Steven Pressfield, his description of **war**. I don't mean that it is poorly described. In fact, it's anything but. Military strategy and battle descriptions are the one aspect where this book shines. The battles are engaging and brilliantly written (though not on Conn Iggulden's level of vivid detail, clarity and suspension). Why do I consider this aspect to also be a failing of the book, then? Simple. I cannot suffer the glorification of war apparent in both this book and "Gates of Fire" (although, to be fair, GfF did try to show the horrors of war as well as its 'virtues'). War is not purifying. It is not virtuous. It is not the most noble of human inventions... I usually love nothing better than trying to acquire the mindsets of different people as I read the books they've written - it's refreshing to look at the world from perspectives other than my own. The mindset of the soldiers in this book is something I never wish to acquire. It's the mindset of the brainwashed patriot and the religious zealot.

4. Finally, **the world** and how lazily it's depicted. Everything is black or white. Steven Pressfield is very careful to make the distinction between West and East. You see, the West was so much more civilized than the East, even in ancient times. Let's completely forget that the entire social system of the West (always capital 'W' in Steven Pressfield's book) is based upon slavery. Let's forget that the Western world at that time has just gone through the Peloponnesian war that has torn Greece apart. Let's forget that the beautiful democracies and monarchies we see in the big cities anywhere - west, north, south or east - rely upon ninety percent of the population working in the fields and never leaving the farms until death or sickness or war do them apart. But forget all this. Think, instead, of how horrible the East (always capital 'E') is - with its empires and kings and oppressed farmers. Pressfield actually has Alexander talk to a Persian farmer (in a manner that is not entirely clear, seeing as Alexander doesn't speak Persian and the farmer certainly doesn't speak Greek) and feeling pity because of the tyranny and oppression the man has to endure. He then proceeds to be disgusted by the corrupted aristocracy of the East and the fact that no man in the East can advance his station. This, coming from a character that's supposed to have been brought up in a culture where slavery is accepted, his father is a famous conqueror and he himself is a prince who inherits his position by right of birth. I doubt that the author is intentionally trying to paint Alexander as horribly lacking in self-awareness, so I can't say I'm impressed with this portrayal of the Persian empire. Life was difficult for anyone not born in a city - in Greece, in Persia, in Egypt, everywhere

I will leave just two quotes below:

"This is the East. On the right hand, one beholds opulence beyond imagination; on the left, destitution that beggars description. The long-suffering of the peasantry approaches the holy. Their carriage and bearing possess *a dignity unmatched even by kings of the West*. But it is the dignity of a stone, weathering centuries, not of a man, descended of heaven."

"In the East there exists no objective standard of achievement, no impartial measure by which a man may establish or advance his station. He cannot 'get ahead.' He cannot 'succeed.' It is not like the egalitarianism of your army, Alexander, which provides an unbiased arena, within which a poor man may make his fortune and a rich man prove worthy of his fame. Here no man exists, save in subordination to another."

Two stars.

Scott says

Written in first person, this novel tells the story of Alexander's conquests through his own words. This book was a major turn-off in the beginning because it was nothing more than a statistical summary of all the components of his army during one campaign versus another. He would list in detail the types of weapons his men carried, how much these weapons weighed, how they were utilized and why they were so effective in certain situations. Also a lot of detail on battlefield strategy, which interested me not in the least. What I was looking for was a story about Alexander and how he came to power, not a checklist of his supplies. But in the end, I realized that my expectations were probably set too high. When you consider that Alexander spent his entire adult life making war, it's probably a pretty accurate depiction of who he really was. What else could be said about a guy who was always thinking ahead to his next battle? So perhaps the novel's weaknesses shouldn't be blamed on Pressfield but instead on Alexander, who maybe just wasn't as interesting as I would've thought. I would like to add, however, that there were parts to the story that I liked very much, especially toward the end when Alexander begins to express a faint sense of regret. If this had been a bigger part of the plot, I would have given it a much better recommendation.

maricar says

An imagination of dazzling and epic scope.

With "Steven Pressfield" on the cover, it took less than a heartbeat for me to grab this book—after *Gates of Fire*, I was more than eager to be caught up again in the author's enthralling prose of storytelling.

Even with the author's Note to the Reader expressly stating this as a work of fiction, I soon found myself actually believing that it really was Alexander speaking his own thoughts—as he tasted the first of his numerous victories, received the adoration of his men, and found himself later possessed of an empire that demanded too much for the price of an ambition.

For that alone, I stand in awe yet again of this author's skill.

Every chapter is vivid with imagery and every conflict a real human drama. The king's moments of anguish were brutal, eerily honest, and, sometimes, understandable, as he becomes torn between love for his army and the desire to conquer the world beyond India. Indeed, Alexander was thrown in a surreal mix of otherworldliness for his exceptional military prowess and glaring human frailty for succumbing to the snare of arrogance and pride.

There were times when Pressfield's narration seemed like it was being apologetic of Alexander's actions towards his men and their growing disquiet, but then I suddenly remember that this book ostensibly echoed *only* Alexander's voice; so I suppose it couldn't help but have that biased feel.

I only wished the book *imagined* a little bit more outside of the battlefield. Like his relations with his mother during his youth, with his wives (or even just with Roxanne), and with the other soldiers (besides his "dear mates") who trekked with him across the plains of Asia. There were some parts as well that felt hurried, while others felt too protracted. And, in some instances I was on the verge of becoming almost bored whenever the book took the tone of becoming more of a manual for warfare, what with the winded accounts

of the number of infantry, cavalry, archers, etc. But, I suppose you really cannot get to being an exalted commander without being anal about these things...

All-in-all, *The Virtues of War* is still a highly-recommended read—epic, artistic, and an honest-to-goodness page-turner...

Sean says

This Alexander isn't very gay, or very megalomaniacal. He does kick ass, however, and take names, all the way to the Indus and back. Got yer Gaugamela right here, Darius.

Nate says

This my second Pressfield novel and is one of those books that inspired a lot of mixed feelings in me. I originally rated it four stars but I think I have to ultimately give it three. What it does, it does excellently, but what it lacks is totally nonexistent. While it does have a ton of fascinating information on Alexander's military and how he carved such a massive empire in a relatively short time without losing a single battle, it's almost impossible to engage on a personal level, which I really don't think is the author's fault and I'll do my best to explain why.

Alexander is brilliant and relentlessly shoved onward by what he calls his *daimon*, peeling apart and smashing the armies of the Greek, Persian, and Indian armies who stand against him, but he's also cold as ice. I felt like Pressfield tried to avoid this by including his interactions with his friend Hephaestion, and scenes of him getting all weepy over stuff. They don't work, and why should they? I don't think anyone has said that Alexander was a warm, compassionate humanist. He started a war with a pretty dubious *casus belli* and caused the deaths of so, so many people and the destabilization of a huge part of earth, as well as even managing to posthumously cause the wars of the Diadochi which caused even more death and chaos. Yet for some reason we kind of look at him in a romanticized, lover-warrior kind of view. The best reason for this that I can come up with is that he came from a Hellenistic culture and a lot of people, including myself, grew up with kind of this nice ideal of them which we don't have for similar cultures who raised gifted conquerors like the Huns, Mongols, etc.

At first I kind of balked at this calculating, alien portrayal of Alexander but then I realized that this is who these people were; they valued glory and power and catapulting themselves into legend through fire and death. This probably leaves very little room left for small-time stuff like compassion, rationality, selflessness, etc. All of this stuff still makes it a compelling portrait of what someone who achieved this kind of wide-scale subjugation might be like. I just had to resign myself to the fact that I wasn't gonna like Alexander.

That said...I still had a thrill in watching him take on such huge Persian armies and smash through them with his repeated uses of deception, feints, and insane cavalry charges straight at the enemy commander (often Darius himself) that basically cause every enemy on the field to shit their pants and stampede each other trying to get away. The battles are always, always fascinating as they present this huge picture of what Alexander is seeing in his head before, during, and after the fighting and Pressfield writes him as a very, very smart and talented soldier. I might be a little too hard on him, as he does obviously feel some remorse over Thebes and generally wasn't as hard on his conquered peoples and enemies as some, but overall a pretty icy and even disingenuous dude.

So another good one from Pressfield, just one that I had a relatively limited connection with--and that's probably how it should be. If you find yourself connecting *too* much with a person who killed thousands upon thousands of people and caused so much turmoil for an ultimately futile and kind of misguided cause, you're probably a little unbalanced--or the next Alexander the Great. Despite all that ranting I did about Alexander's character in this novel I still kept turning the pages and enjoying myself as I learned more about him once I let go of the desire to like him. Kind of makes me want to revisit another book with a character I thought turned into a totally murderous dick that ended up making me dislike the story; Conn Iggulden's *Lords of the Bow*, which is another credit to Pressfield. Two out of two so far, although certainly not as affecting as *Gates of Fire*, which all fans of historical fiction should probably give a shot if they haven't.

Giannis says

να βιβλίο που πρέπει να διαβούν όλοι για να εκτιμήσουν το μεγαλείο όχι της Αυτοκρατορίας του Αλέξανδρου, αλλά το μεγαλείο του μυαλού, της ψυχής και του χαρακτήρα του. να πραγματοποιήσης ηγήτης που ενπνεύσε εκατοντάδες χιλιάδες ανθρώπους να τον ακολουθήσουν στο άγνωστο!!

A.J. says

There are very few stories in the short history of civilization that can match that of Alexander the Great. The name alone inspires a kind of awe, and after reading Steven Pressfield's impressive historical-fiction account, I feel as though I have a better appreciation for just how amazing Alexander's life was. In his twenties he was breaking apart the Sacred Band of Thebes, assaulting the Persian empire, and conquering further and faster than anyone to the time had dreamed of doing. It's one thing to abstractly think, "Wow, Alexander controlled most of the known world at 32." It's quite another to be dropped into the battles, understand just how outnumbered he was most of the time, and the staggering genius it took to break the Persian empire in two.

Pressfield's style is one that I can understand how a few people might be turned off. Personally, I loved it. I enjoy military history, and so I have no problem with Alexander, in the first person, explaining exactly how the battle is going to go, and then having the actual battle scene follow. Pressfield's basic out is this: he's doing equal parts history and fiction, and not sacrificing either. Not to mention, being a tactician, this doubling up on battles makes a certain sense in the context of who Alexander is.

Aside from fantastic battle sequences, Pressfield found a clear voice for one of history's most extraordinary figures. Pressfield's Alexander is very aware of himself. On the one hand he's Alexander, a man who just loves being a soldier. On the other hand he's 'Alexander,' conquerer of the world, thought by many to be a deity, needing to plant his flag for his age and all the ages to follow by reaching the ends of the earth. He struggles to match his lofty dreams with the realities of a discontented army far from home in the sweltering heat of India. Through his own eyes we come to understand why people were able to love him so easily, and how dedicated he was to a singular ambition. The complexities, rewards and challenges of being the most powerful man to ever live bring life to what is usually the monotone of a history book.

On the fact front, it seems that Pressfield really did his homework. Sometimes when I read historical fiction and research the stuff later, discrepancies begin to appear. With what little I know of Alexander's conquest, Pressfield is as true to history as he is to telling a gripping story. Education and entertainment. What a concept.

Very, very solid novel. A real page-turner. Highly recommended, particularly to anyone interested in ancient history.

"The sarissa's song is a sad song.
He pipes it soft and low.
I would ply a gentler trade, says he,
But war is all I know."

Terri says

It's a 3 star. For many that translates into a fail, and most of the time it does for me too, but this one does fit well with the Goodreads description of what 3 star book means to a reader. 'Liked it'. Because I did. I liked it. It was not always thrilling or humanised enough for me. I never felt connected to Alexander (this is likely due to the first person narrative style of the book) and yet I did not dislike the book. It was simply one of those steady as she goes, beat the drum slowly kind of books. Which of course does not sit well enough for me in a book about one of the greatest battle leaders of history. It should not be so steady, it should be passionately told and thrilling to behold. Like, dare I say it, Gates of Fire was. What Pressfield did for the Spartans last stand, he did not do for Alexander's foreign battlefields. Virtues of War was more of a push than a kick. I enjoyed it, liked it, but it was a little disappointing overall.

Myke Cole says

Virtues of War is what its title suggests, a treatise on the personality characteristics and decision making process of great warriors. It is, in the guise of narrative fiction, an instruction manual for leaders of troops, and is incredibly effective at what it does. I only wish I had read it before assuming my first command.

Pressfield is a singular writer, and this is on offer in his ability to make Alexander, a historical figure so remote as to be deified, a sympathetic character who resonates with the reader. You may think it impossible to identify with the ruler of the entire western world, and the greatest tactician in history, but Pressfield enables you to pull it off, so that Alexander's longing and loneliness becomes your own. It makes the book at the same time mournful and triumphant, and it is definitely worth your time.

Bobby says

Solid 3 stars but not because of any fault of the author!! Just too technical for my tastes. His knowledge of Alexander's campaigns is unbelievable and any student of Alexander, I'm sure, will rave about this read. I appreciated, near the end, the description of what is needed to vanquish an army utilizing guerrilla tactics and that logic would explain the U.S. inability to have success against such an enemy in Vietnam!

Knigoqdec says

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Jane says

The novel was fairly interesting, but far from Pressfield's best. I thought he reached his apogee with Gates of Fire or possibly Afghan Campaign.

This story begins with Alexander's men wishing to turn back from India and go home; they feel they've fought and died far enough from home for long enough. Alexander's in his tent with Itanes, his young brother-in-law, and wants "someone to talk to ... who can listen without judgment and keep his mouth shut...it is my role to instruct you [in the art of war]." He then delivers a book-long series of monologues to Itanes, on that very subject. I had visions of a pompous professor in a gown like an English don delivering very long lectures to a class of one.

Alexander instructs Itanes on his [Alexander's] life, through various wars and battles Alexander has fought. Itanes's presence isn't even acknowledged until 80-some pages into the novel and after that, sporadically. Alexander gives his ideas on what makes a good soldier. The battle descriptions were well done, and Alexander's advice to various officers and his "Maxims on War" were very common-sense. I was reminded of Sun Tzu's writings on the latter.

I didn't like this portrayal of Alexander. He came across as arrogant, devious, excessively cruel at some points, almost wooden; my teeth were set on edge. He came across as a braggart. For the most part, he was unsympathetic until he and his men fought the Persians and he saw the suffering of his men.

I did like: *his description of how he met Hephæstion, who became his life-long close friend and soulmate.
*his description of Babylonian society.
*his even-handedness in his appraisal of Memnon, his Greek mercenary opponent in the Persian War.
*the Chronology at the end of the book

I did a 'double-take' when he mentioned striking "the bone" in battle to "count the cadence" of marching men. Immediately I thought of the symandron, used to this day. [To those who may not know what a symandron is, it is a special board, struck rhythmically with a mallet to call monks and nuns to prayer in Greek Orthodox monasteries and convents.]

All in all, this book was good enough, but not outstanding. I feel it's basically for people who want to read more Pressfield or for those who devour everything on Alexander the Great. This book has influenced me to dislike anything Alexander the Great! It left such a bad taste in my mouth!
