



## The Persian Boy

Mary Renault , ?????????? (Translator)

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“It takes skill to depict, as Miss Renault has done, this half-man, half Courtesan who is so deeply in love with the warrior.”—*The Atlantic Monthly*

**The Persian Boy** traces the last years of Alexander’s life through the eyes of his lover, Bagoas. Abducted and gelded as a boy, Bagoas was sold as a courtesan to King Darius of Persia, but found freedom with Alexander after the Macedon army conquered his homeland. Their relationship sustains Alexander as he weathers assassination plots, the demands of two foreign wives, a sometimes-mutinuous army, and his own ferocious temper. After Alexander’s mysterious death, we are left wondering if this Persian boy understood the great warrior and his ambitions better than anyone.

### The Persian Boy Details

Date : Published February 12th 1988 by Vintage (first published 1972)

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Author : Mary Renault , ?????????? ???? (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The Persian Boy for online ebook

### Terry says

I really don't have a lot to say about this book. It's the first one by Renault that I've been...hmm, not disappointed, but perhaps underwhelmed by. We continue with the story of Alexander the Great from the point at which we left him in Fire from Heaven. Or we sort of do...because this volume is told to us as the first-person memoirs of Bagoas, a Persian noble whose family was killed during internecine fighting for the Persian throne. Bagoas is captured as a young boy by his family's murderers and is made into a eunuch who, due to his good looks, is ultimately sold as a sex slave.

By some fairly circuitous routes he moves from dire circumstances to become first the lover of the Persian King Darius and, finally, fulfills the same role for Alexander. The first quarter of the book is exclusively concerned with the life of Bagoas and the Persian court during which Alexander is little more than a rumour of menace and looming danger. Afterwards we are immersed in the battles and internal intrigues of Alexander's mobile army-court-realm as he makes his way eastward on his progress to conquer most of the known world. Of course everything is told from Bagoas' perspective so many events, primarily battles and the personal and political affairs of Alexander that do not revolve around Bagoas, are told second hand. I think this arm's-length approach to the central figure is the element of the book I liked least. I didn't personally find Bagoas to be a particularly compelling character, though he was by no means a bad one, and I really just wanted to get a closer look at Alexander and his life as we did in the first volume.

All that being said this is still a well-executed piece of historical fiction written in Renault's fine prose. The ability of Alexander to turn his dreams and aspirations into reality is truly awe-inspiring as he attempts, according to Renault at least, to mould a disparate world of warring kingdoms and peoples into a unified empire. Alexander is presented, in many ways, as very forward-thinking in this regard, but I am happy to report that it did not seem, to me at least, to be a case of the writer feeling the need to 'modernize' her characters in order to make them palatable to readers as much as an expression of her own beliefs about what the actions and achievements of Alexander pointed to. He is still very much a man of his time, just a truly exceptional one. I wonder if there was perhaps a bit too much hero-worship of Alexander on Renault's part (though one could argue this was more the result of Bagoas' obvious love and adoration of him and the natural result of his role as narrator of this story).

All in all a good read, but not my favourite.

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### Lola says

The only historical romance the stole my heart and broke it at the end.....so sad. Bagoas was a young nobleman's son. Through treachery of his father's friend, his own family was killed and him sold into slavery, gelded and sold to a merchant. He was only 12 and he was raped and molested by his master and clients. Later he was sold to the King of Persia and became a dancer and a pleasure slave. When Alexander came, he escaped and was presented to Alexander as a gift. This here begins the romance of Bagoas the Persian dancing boy and Alexander the Great.

Note that this is not entirely history since historical reference of Bagoas was very scarce. BUT he was referred to as Alexander's "most Beloved" and Alexander did indeed kiss him in public after he won the dancing competition. Sadly I have a feeling his place was not as high as Alexander's best friend Hephaestion, who was involved with Alexander as well. This book can be read independent of any of its sequel or

prequel. I believe this is the best out of the three, not just as gay romance but also romance in general.

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## Diana says

After thinking about this book more I had to change the rating.

The lack of my perfect Hephaestion ruined the book for me. He was the most important person in Alexander's life, for goodness' sake! It doesn't matter if they were actually lovers or not. He was the only person who loved Alexander as a person. And that's why Alexander valued his opinion the most. Hephaestion never lied to Alexander, if he thought that the king was wrong, he said it. He was a very brave man, capable of doing amazing things. People envied and hated him because of Alexander's love and trust for him. Even though the nature of their relationship has never been confirmed, I believe that the fact that they did truly visit the tomb of Patroclus and Achilles makes the matter quite clear. Mary Renault compared them to these two in this novel, which is another reason why I can't understand why Hephaestion was so heartbreakingly (at least for me) absent in this book.

And Bagoas... I HATED HIM. I hated him so much that even though the book was well written, I just wanted to finish it as quickly as possible. He was an annoying, whiny, useless, false, lying crybaby (I wish I could use Polish swear words to describe him, they're so strong:P). He was just a pretty boy, nothing more. I didn't believe in his "love" for Alexander. In my opinion he was just grateful for being treated so well by his master, whom he admired (who wouldn't?) but that would be all. I think I'm going to remove this book from my m/m shelf because I didn't feel the romance at all. Bagoas' POV was obviously very limited, so there were very few moments between the king and Hephaestion and they were the only ones that felt romantic to me. To be quite honest, *Alexander* (with Colin Farrell) was more romantic. Seriously, I was about 11-12 when I watched it and I knew that something was going on between the two. "*All I know is I trust only you in this world. I've missed you. I need you. It is you I love, Hephaestion. No other.*" - this line perfectly shows the truth - Hephaestion was Alexander's beloved.

Unfortunately, there weren't many moments in *The Persian Boy* worth mentioning. And you have no idea how sad it makes me. This was the most disappointing book I have ever read. Not just because of the absence of Hephaestion, but also because I didn't learn anything I hadn't known before:!

But I'm going to read *Fire from Heaven* (why didn't I read it first? ugh) and I hope that I'll like it more than *The Persian Boy* because if not, I'll never read anything by Mary Renault again.

(I didn't say anything good about this book, did I? Oops! I'm just angry and so, so disappointed. Also, why does historical fiction always make me so depressed?;\_;

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## Iset says

*The Persian Boy* follows on from *Fire From Heaven* and takes us to the heart of Alexander's life story; his

travels and conquests of the Persian empire as Macedonian king.

The first thing I noted straight away was that *The Persian Boy* has a different feel from *Fire From Heaven*. *Fire From Heaven* is told in traditional third person but mainly from the perspective of the young Alexander, and the story ends just as Alexander becomes king. Before going into this book I expected *The Persian Boy* to directly follow on, with Alexander crossing over into Anatolia, and the titular character of Bagoas to be a significant character but the story told once again third person mainly from Alexander's perspective. In fact *The Persian Boy* promptly discarded those expectations. Told entirely from Bagoas' point of view, from first person point of view, the early part of the story covers Bagoas' early life and Alexander doesn't make an appearance until after the Battle of Gaugamela and Darius' death, when Bagoas is gifted to Alexander's court. I'm not sure if I like this or not. With this approach, the reader misses out on some of Alexander's key and most famous conquests; the Battle of Granikos, the Battle of Issos, the Siege of Tyre, the liberation of Egypt and the visit to the Siwa oracle, the decisive Battle of Gaugamela and Alexander's first entry into Babylon as the new Great King of the Persian Empire. For me, as someone who thinks Alexander's life is fascinating, this is somewhat disappointing. On the other hand, I wonder if I can really blame Renault for this. She decided to tell Alexander's life from someone close to him and someone who at the same time provides the flip Persian perspective, and Bagoas himself is an interesting historical figure. Once she picked that path, she stuck to it, and I can respect that. I should have thought it went without saying, but recently, notably in Philippa Gregory's *The Cousins' War* series, I can't help but notice historical fiction written in first person being done very awkwardly, with events that occur outside the character's knowledge being dealt with by jarring switching out to third person omniscient just for the one battle scene in the book, or a stream of convenient but tiresome messengers being used. I'm not a big fan of first person in historical fiction because it's limiting, but if an author's going to do it I think they should stick to it, after all what's the point of using first person if you're not going to tell one individual's unique story through their own eyes? Renault never gets bogged down in messengers either, for events Bagoas doesn't personally experience – instead, the character hears direct from other characters what happened, or summarises, neatly but with enough detail, what he later discovered happened.

Another interesting point about using Bagoas as this story's narrator, as I've mentioned, is the perspective this character brings to events. The character of Bagoas is not just a modern person thrown into a past setting expressing 21st century values, as some characters that populate historical fiction are. He's not even a random person from ancient times. Renault has carefully and very cleverly written her Bagoas with his authentic, unique values and bias intact. This Bagoas has pride in Persian customs and traditions, and, at least at first, finds the Macedonians uncouth, barbaric, and ignorant. Even towards the end of the book he continues to be pleased by Alexander's efforts to reconcile Macedonian and Persian administration of the empire, and believes that Alexander's adopting of Persian customs is him coming into "harmony" with them. I really admire how well thoughtfully and subtly this has been done. Renault has succeeded in imbuing her character with realistic values and opinions for his place and time, and yet at the same time it was always clear to me as the reader where this bias was exerting itself when Bagoas offered an opinion – the reader is not supposed to wholesale believe Bagoas, but sees where his opinions are directed by his biases, and decide for themselves. This is another crucial skill in historical fiction. Novels that end up with caricatured villains and good guys see to push the good guys' angle on the reader. I prefer the novels that stand back and show each "side" as realistic and human and whilst they don't put words in the mouths of their characters, they leave the reader free to draw our own conclusions – and the truth is that human history is far too complex and subtle to just be goodies versus baddies. So I, for one, appreciate this realistic yet lucid portrayal that Mary Renault paints in *The Persian Boy*.

*Fire From Heaven* was the first in a trilogy. Perfectly judged, written with a deft touch that made it wonderful magic to read. But when I closed the book I knew there was more to come, I knew *Fire From Heaven* was building up to *The Persian Boy*. *The Persian Boy* is the rich heart of Renault's Alexander trilogy. Although some key events are omitted due to narrative choice, the book still covers Alexander's campaigns in Bactria, Sogdiana, and India, and some of his toughest ordeals. This is Alexander the man,

Alexander the Great King. At just over 400 pages it's longer than most historical novels these days, but it feels like a true epic twice as long, such is the breadth and scope of Renault's vision – and indeed such was the grand scope of Alexander's life. I love a good epic. I feel like they have the room to explore the detail and subtleties of historical people and events, and Renault certainly does so here. She's a master of show and tell, building up Alexander and the others through their actions and only telling in places where Bagoas mentions being told about an event before the characters met. I can't quite get over how sophisticated Renault's characters are. It takes real patience to build up characters onion layer style, but it's the most realistic method, and after reading so many historical novels where the characters are unchanging and flat, their 'personality' conveyed by the narrator repeatedly telling the reader about the same tic or quirk over and over again, this is so wonderful and sublime. What strikes me about authors that can successfully create three-dimensional characters is that everything is so carefully thought out and planned. Like with the characters, the plot too is mapped out in an advance, and every single scene advances that plot and the characters; no superfluous fluff. Authors like George R. R. Martin, and, in the historical fiction genre, Sharon Penman and Pauline Gedge. The late Mary Renault is right up there with the best of them. Her dedication to historical authenticity is commendable too, as her author's note plainly shows. In *The Persian Boy* she weaves a seamless vision of the life of Alexander that swept me away for unknown hours until I turned the last page.

Highly recommended.

**10 out of 10**

P.S. Interestingly, Renault has a pertinent comment in her author's note regarding what has been seen as a very modern debate in historical fiction (the book was published in 1973); dedication to historical accuracy. History often shows that the same debates and complaints recur, it seems this is no different:

*As regards the ancient world, the political motives of these [i.e. Roman commentators opposed to imperial rule] unconvincing attempts to show Alexander corrupted by success are clear enough. More puzzling is a present-day outbreak of what one may call black-washing, since it goes far beyond a one-sided interpretation of facts to their actual misinterpretation. A recent popularisation says only of Philotas' execution that it was 'on a trumped-up charge', though his concealment of the assassination plot is agreed on by all the sources. (What would be the position of a modern security guard who, informed there was a bomb on the royal plane, decided not to mention it?) Hephaestion is 'fundamentally stupid,' though in not one of his highly responsible independent missions, diplomatic as well as military, was he ever unsuccessful. Alexander is baldly accused of compassing his father's death, though not only is the evidence, literally, nil; Philip had not even a viable alternative heir to supply a motive. 'Severe alcoholism' is said to have hastened Alexander's end; any general practitioner could explain what a severe alcoholic's work capacity is, and what his chance of surviving lung perforation, unanaesthetised field surgery, and a desert march. After the gesture of the troops at Alexander's deathbed, an event unique in history, it is somewhat surprising to be told that few people mourned him. That there are fashions in admiration and denigration is inevitable; they should not however be followed at the expense of truth.*

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**Erik Graff says**

This is the second of Mary Renault's Alexander trilogy. The first, *Fire from Heaven*, deals with his childhood

until the death of the king of Macedon, his father. The third deals with events following upon his death. The Persian Boy details his conquests from the perspective of one of his lovers, a eunuch based on an actual historical personage.

It was at about this time, while in the midst of a Mary Renault binge, that I came upon one of her contemporary novels at a bookstore near Columbia University. It was about lesbians. I was rather shocked. Although I'd read at least six of her novels by this point and although all of them had at least some portrayal of ancient Greek bisexuality, it had never, ever entered my mind that she was gay or pushing the lifestyle. Well, she was and that is probably good for anyone seeking a sympathetic reconstruction of what it may have been like to live in such a culture. It certainly slipped past my homophobic defenses and brought me to a more open-minded attitude.

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### Christin says

Every time I pick this book up to read just a passage I find myself getting sucked in again. This is my desert island book, if I could just bring one with me. Every time I read it I could just turn it over and start from the beginning again. It's epic and then again, it's about a boy's first love. There's the sweep of history, and then there's very personal humor and heartbreak. Seriously, Bagoas will rip your heart out. The last line makes me cry.

I will probably never be able to read Funeral Games, it's too upsetting.

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### Denise says

I had to sit with this book and digest it for a few days after finishing before I could even start to put together coherent thoughts about it.

The writing style is a lot simpler from the first book, where you chase around Alexander's thoughts in a limited-third-person. This book is a relatively straight forward first-person told by Bagoas, and you spend most of your mental effort on the themes instead of the prose, which is appreciated.

The fundamental theme of the book, to my read, is that of unequal love. Bagoas loves Alexander obsessively, caring for him like a fretting nursemaid, sleeping with him whenever he needs or wants it with little thought to his own pleasure, and in the heartbreaking final scene (view spoiler) Bagoas is Alexander's slave, in the literal sense of course, but he is also completely and utterly mentally enslaved to him.

Alexander, however, loves Bagoas only because Bagoas loves *him*. He does not seem particularly interested in Bagoas as a person (even though the character Bagoas is a bright and engaging young man, with an inborn knack for politics and picking up new languages). He does make gestures of presents to Bagoas, including a very sad scene where (view spoiler), but you get the sense that this is Alexander being polite. Alexander likes having Bagoas around and being taken care of, and he likes sleeping with him, but when he has 'serious' emotional needs he invariably turns to Hephaestion, because he doesn't respect Bagoas as an equal. Whether this is because Bagoas is a eunuch, or perhaps a natural side effect of the accepted man/boy Greek dynamic of the time, I could not decide.

The question the book presented to me was: is this unequal yet not unrequited love (a type of love we do not see often in literature) a valid form of love? If one party in a relationship is slavishly devoted while the other

is merely fond, and they both accept this, is it okay?

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## Lishesque says

Some favorite parts:

"We had our summer. On the hills with the hounds crying, racing the clouds; in the rose garden with its lotus pools; in the high hall whose columns were sheathed with gold and silver, as I did my Dance of the River to the sound of flutes; in the great Bedchamber where I had been shamed and now was cherished, each day and night, I used to say to myself, I will miss nothing; I will never let my eye or my ear or my soul or my senses sleep, never forget to know that I am happy. For it will be a long campaign; and who knows when we shall come back?

Thus the Wise God gives prophecy enough, but not too much; as he does to birds, who foresee the winter, but not the night of ice that will drop them from the bough.

...

Never let a moment flow by me unthanked, unkissed." -pg 376

"...the prophetic voice was silent, which had said at Ekbatana, 'Carve this upon your heart.' It spared me; it did not say, 'Never again.'" -pg 406

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## Alicja says

rating: 6/5!

I am in love with Bagoas' Alexander!

This second (because it wouldn't be like me to actually read books in their intended order, now would it?) in Renault's trilogy about the life of Alexander the Great. This novel is told from the point of view of Bagoas, his lover and servant. Bagoas, Persian king Darius' eunuch slave, was given to Alexander by a Persian noble to gain favor after they murdered Darius. Alexander sets him free but Bagoas chooses to stay and serve him, and then proceeds to fall in love with and seduce the king. Through his eyes we witness epic battles, treachery within the king's ranks, political intrigue, injuries and sickness, drama with Alexander's wives, rivalry with Hephaesiton for Alexander's affection, etc. until the king's mysterious death at the age of 32, just a month short of his 33rd birthday.

Bagoas lost his family as a child to traitors and was sold into slavery after being castrated to retain his youthful and beautiful looks. He had been used by a few Persian households until he was bought to be trained to serve king Darius as one of his (hundreds? thousands? male and female) concubines. Alexander (and his father, Philip) at this point had already united the Greeks and had been crowned the Pharaoh of Egypt. Already a legend with an almost god-like reputation (or one of Zeus' son as proclaimed by the oracle of Delphi), he set out to conquer Persia.

When Alexander received Bagoas as a gift, he let him stay as a servant if he wished or be free. It wasn't until

Bagoas decided to seduce the king that the story took on mythic propitiations. Alexander, through Bagoas' narration, is presented as very human and flawed, a man who deeply craves love from everyone. Bagoas wasn't blind to his murders, ruthlessness in war, short temper, drunkenness, etc. He not only saw Alexander at his most vulnerable, as a man who loved and hurt and grieved, but also as a man who was larger than life, one who dreamt big and was fearless on the battlefield. It is such a unique look at Alexander's life that you can't help but fall in love with the king. Bagoas wasn't just a passive observer either. He loved Alexander but had his own insecurities. He questioned his status in Alexander's court, being seen as a Persian "barbarian" among, in his view, the "barbaric" Macedonians. He also questioned his place with Alexander among the king's wives and Hephaestion, Alexander's lifelong best friend and lover.

Throughout, we see a version of Alexander that historical books, sparse on the details of his private life, can't provide. The author invented most of the details regarding Bagoas because he is only mentioned a few times in historical texts (the fact that a eunuch Persian slave boy was mentioned at all in relation to Alexander would seem to signify that he has had a significant role). The narrative does an amazing job describing the sights and sounds of the ancient world marred in war and ethnic conflicts. This novel is emotional, sorrowful and joyful, and will lead the reader from tears to laughter and back to tears again during the tragic and mysterious ending of the king's life. Renault may lay it on a bit thick at the end describing the omens of impending death but when taken into context, the Greeks did pay much attention to symbols and prophecies, in turn the descriptions provide yet another layer of depth.

It is a marvelous, completely brilliant book based on all the facts available regarding Alexander's life and filled in beautifully with fiction by Mary Renault. Her words are almost poetic and draw you in from the start. She weaves history, realism, myth, and invention in such a way that it leads you to believe that these really were the details of Alexander's life, as written by Bagoas after the king's death (and the first person point of view is literary magic in her hands). This is truly a must read novel.

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### **Shawn says**

Mary Renault is a master historical novelist. I love the way she showed us Alexander the Great differently than he is often portrayed in the history books and Pressfield novels. I enjoy Pressfield's work as well but to him Alexander was first and foremost a classical Hellenist and warrior. Renault focuses on Alexander the lover how he was viewed by his Persian boy; a eunuch, a slave, but also an influential master of his privy chamber. I was bothered in the beginning by Renault's romanticizing what would be consider modern pedophilia but then I think it is important for historical novels to accurately depict the times without whitewash. Bogoas is the focus of the novel and she remains true to his viewpoint. The book did seem to downplay Alexander's wife Roxanne, and his mother Olympias, in the story and that was unfortunate. But then this is the third Renault novel I have read and women rarely play powerful roles. She also gives short shift to his generals, Ptolemy and Hephastion. She is an excellent writer and this is considered one of her most influential works. In my mind it fell slightly short of "Funeral Games".

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### **Laura says**

Extremely vivid, descriptive historical fiction about the relationship between Alexander the Great and a slave boy named Bagoas, and (I say this as someone with very little interest in romance/love stories) a touchingly beautiful love story. The two characters are so gorgeously human and wonderful, and the selfless, unconditional love Bagoas feels for Alexander is just so moving and real. It's a sad story, but in my opinion never maudlin, and it inspired so many deep emotions in me that it left me kind of shell-shocked after I had

finished it. The ending seemed understated and even a little abrupt at first but then after I thought about it I decided it was a perfect ending, the truest to the character of Bagoas.

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### **Mel Bossa says**

Splendid. I savored every page. Bagoas's devotion to his lord and his understanding of the warrior he lay with every night--his deep love for Alexander and respect for this flawed but incredible man, moved and inspired me.

The tale is epic. The journey is unforgettable. The excitement and exotic landscapes are beautifully rendered--the history and romance coming together like Macedonia and Persia.

The last few chapters, from Hephaestion's death and on, are worth the whole sweeping book.

In Hades world, will Patrocles finally allow The Persian Boy to continue to love his Achilles?

What a tale that could be...

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### **Crystal Starr Light says**

Bullet Review:

Wow.

That ending!! Where's the next book?! How can it just end like that?!

Full Review:

Alexander the Great (or, according to my personal historian, as his title should be known, in its native tongue, "o Megas Alexandros") is absolutely an awe-inspiring person. When you put into perspective the time period, the cultures, and then think about the things Alexander did, it's absolutely extraordinary.

This is the story of Alexander's later life, as told through the eyes of his Persian "boy", Bagoas, who also (in this story and perhaps in real life) was his lover. Through Bagoas' eyes, we see Alexander's extraordinary feats, but we also see how human Alexander is - how he was flawed, how he tired, how he loved, how he raged.

Last year, I started "Fire from Heaven", the first book in the Alexander trilogy, and my thoughts were all over the place. Mostly, I recall the writing being a challenge to get through (probably because of all the crap young adult I had been reading up to that time where subtlety and complexity are taboo). But I did not find this the case at all with "The Persian Boy". I personally loved the first person past tense used here - even more so because Renault executes it PERFECTLY!

First person is very chic these days, and it can be used well. It's plopping right into the head of your narrator and seeing and feeling and experiencing everything he or she does. That can be awesome - but it can also be

limiting, ESPECIALLY for historical novels, or novels where something important happens away from the narrator.

"Eclipse" combated that with a cheesy "Bella is asleep but in her dreams hears Edward and Jacob talk about her" scene. Other novels have characters butt themselves in where they don't belong, miraculously receive information that is just what the reader needs, a chain of messengers, have the narrator skip over that time period and summarize it, or the absolute worst, switch to third person past to relay the scene.

Renault never does that; Bagoas is a pretty prominent character, part of Alexander's court, so it makes sense he would know some of what he does. In the beginning, Bagoas is a lesser eunuch in Darius' court and therefore knows almost nothing about what is going on, unless he is busy asking others questions. I'm not really doing a great job of saying it, but what I mean is: Renault doesn't feel the need to mangle her story so that Bagoas can relay everything to the audience.

I would say most of the characters are very relatable and, most importantly, REAL. Bagoas had his moments where he annoyed me (I think part of him was just in love with being in love with someone), but overall, his story was interesting, compelling, heart-rending, and passionate. I loved how he didn't try to supersede Alexander - such as giving Alexander key advice how to win battles and crap - nor does he also do the other thing I hate in first person: make all the characters he doesn't like evil, wicked people.

Bagoas doesn't like Hephaestion because he wants to be the only one to love Alexander. (By the way, this is the part that aggravated me most about Bagoas, because I LOVED the way Renault wrote Hephaestion and Alexander - if we are going to do that silly "team" thing that got popularized in "Twilight", I am Team Hephaestion.) But at no point does it mean that Hephaestion is an evil guy. Nope, it is clearly Bagoas' opinion. And most authors wouldn't do that. When I read Phillipa Gregory's "The Other Boleyn Girl", it was clear that not only did Mary think Anne was evil (or Jane a busybody), but the author thought that Anne was evil, and Anne was, therefore, written as an evil woman.

There is a HUGE amount of STUFFS that happen in this book, making it a really long book. But unlike many really long books, it's not like there's a scene or a section where I can say, "The Author should have red-inked that". In fact, if anything, I think the author could have put MORE into it. For instance, Bagoas hints that he lives in Egypt with Ptolemy at the end - how does that happen? Did he create a relationship with Ptolemy? If so, I would have loved to see the conversations.

This really is an incredible book looking at the life of Alexander. For a moment, I got to see how MUCH he accomplished, and yet how much more he wanted to do. Renault's Alexander comes alive on the pages through Bagoas' eyes, showing him to be a vivacious, intelligent, larger-than-life man - and yet just a man still.

This is a pretty meaty book, and I found it better to enjoy in larger chunks than a page or two at a time. This, coupled with my occasional aggravation with Bagoas and my desire to leave that final star open for the final book in the series, is what causes this to be rated 4 stars instead of the full 5.

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## **Seth Reeves says**

### **2.5 Stars**

Can't say I hated this book nor that I liked it, really. The story is narrated entirely by a eunuch, Bagoas, that Alexander is gifted by a defeated Persian lord early on in Alexander's conquest of Persia and Asia in general.

The eunuch loves Alexander so much that it gets annoying as the story goes on. He is constantly going on about his love for Alexander and their nights together, also in very 1950s prudish expansive prose. I'm not opposed to reading about relationships but as this is a telling of the story of a great military leader I would have enjoyed the narrative more if we could have heard from some of the soldiers, sailors or other conquered peoples regarding the events that took place.

The book is mind-numbingly repetitive in several aspects. There's a line in one of the later chapters where Bagoas says "Alexander inspired jealousy" and I just wanted to scream "No shit, Sherlock! You've only been saying how fucking jealous everyone one is of him and his favor for the past 400 pages!" Even the war scenarios took on this repetitiveness after a while. He keeps explaining in different ways that Alexander rewards fealty and punishes betrayal. After this happens for the sixth or seventh time I think I got the point.

I guess my biggest criticism of the book is that it's about an extremely interesting historical figure and the book is just barely readable. It's amazing how a really great writer can stoke your fascination in the mundane or the unknown while a middling writer takes on a well known and intriguing subject and actually saps away your interest, as is the case with this book.

In my heart I am a lover of history and this was a not completely unpleasant way to deepen my knowledge about the life and death of Alexander the Great.

I only hope that another better storyteller takes a swing at this source material and manages to wring out of it a better novel for future generations to learn about and immerse themselves in one of the western world's first well-chronicled major historical figures.

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### **Robert Case says**

"The Persian Boy" is the second volume of Mary Renault's biographical recreation of the life and deeds of Alexander the Great. The first volume "Fire From Heaven" chronicled the formative years, from child and youth, into victorious eighteen-year old general. It was the story of a fascinating transformation, expertly told in the third person by an unseen narrator.

The perspective shifts in this second volume. Here, the story is told in the first person, narrated by an adult lover and eunuch, who as a youth was sold as a courtesan to the king of Persia, only to be liberated after Alexander's Macedonian army conquers his homeland. While Alexander conquers Egypt and India, the narrator follows, as servant, then lover, and finally confidant, supporting and advising Alexander through assassination attempts, the demands of two foreign wives, and a sometimes-mutinuous army. "The Persian Boy" ends quite abruptly with Alexander's sudden death by illness, leaving this reader to wonder, "Good story. But, with Alexander gone, why should I care about the third volume?"

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### **Kylie says**

I feel drained. Alexander, my beautiful boy, I love you. His characterization was so lovely, in this book and in the first. My only wish is that Hephaistion and Bagoas had loved him together, not apart. Also, I cried so much at the end. I know Alexander and Hephaistion were Achilles and Patroclus, but did Renault really have to do me like that with the grieving scenes... The sobbing, the descent into madness, the sawing off of the hair, the funeral pyre... It hurt so much.

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"Without Hephaestion, he cannot bear even immortality." (Ouch.)

"[Alexander] gave me a look, and I thought, The world is breaking."

"Perdikkas stepped over to the bed. 'Alexander, when you are received among the gods, at what times shall we offer you worship?'

...Alexander came back to us, as if out of deep water. The smile still hung about him. He whispered, 'When you are happy.' Then he closed his eyes, and returned to where he had been."

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## Rachel says

It is possible - though somewhat distressing - that my love affair with Mary Renault is beginning to draw to a close. It began about eight years ago, when I first read *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea* surrounding a passionate, pilgrimage-like trip to Greece. I was amazed that Renault possessed the same respect, reverence even for the Greeks and the Greek culture that I did. The care and seriousness with which she endowed her historical novels impressed me - here, I thought, is another person like me! It didn't bother me that much, then, that her books were so universally lacking in female characters - she wrote about Greek, mostly homosexual (though all of them, with the possible exception of Bagoas, are at least slightly bisexual, which touch of realism I also appreciated) men, and those were important stories that needed to be told, even though there was little room for women in them.

However, several years later, having just now finished the last of her historical novels that I will ever read for the first time (two of her earlier, contemporary set efforts I haven't been able to secure yet), I find that I can look at her with clearer, more judgmental eyes. I see flaws, now, in her writing, that I never noticed before - shortcuts she makes in her characterization, the way the persistent marginalization of the women in her stories moves beyond a quirk of plot and into a troubling, almost, Anne Rice-like pattern, the way the structure of her novels is almost always oddly anti-climactic, with the plot petering out in a manner that, while it may be quite realistic, proves distinctly unsatisfying. I don't fall into a sort of contented adoration when reading her books any longer - I don't feel quite so much at home.

But, nonetheless, she remains *good*, and strangely unique. She writes about Greek men, Greek masculinity with this astonishing clarity and compassion that I don't think anyone else has quite managed on that particular topic. She is still the only author I know who writes men in love with one another and remaining - realistically - warriors, without a hint of stereotype (this turns into a quite ugly denigration of effeminate gay men in *The Charioteer*, which is enormously problematic, but we'll leave that alone for now). And what I found most interesting in *The Persian Boy* was the freedom that she found, in the person of this entirely unexpected narrative voice, to explore this really fascinating dialogue about what the classical Greek culture means, what makes it what it is and how much of that is actually worthwhile.

*The Persian Boy* is a strange book. It is the story of Bagoas, a eunuch in the court of King Darius III of Persia, who became the *eromenos* of Alexander the Great after Alexander's conquest of Persia. It's a brilliant example of an author taking a minor figure in history and opening them up, making them into a very wonderful and unique window into a large and important time while still giving them realistic prominence as an individual. I appreciated it as a book that gave voice to a voiceless figure in history, for eunuchs and concubines get mentioned on the sidelines of both of histories and novels - for a character to rise to the rank of protagonist, normally they must daringly and implausibly escape both of those situations. Bagoas' position also gave him a unique and interesting perspective on the aforementioned Greek/Persian dialogue that runs

throughout the book. While he loves Alexander unerringly, and loves the Greek qualities in him because they are part of him, he finds Greek ideals and ideas, generally speaking, ludicrous and laughable (but, of course, he loves Homer, because I don't think Mary Renault could bear to write a point of view character who didn't like Homer). His paeans to the dignity and power of hierarchical Persian court rituals, especially the ritual of vassals' prostration before their king, are startling and powerful, and almost convincing. You side with him for a long time, sharing his frustration as Alexander's Macedonian comrades proudly refuse to bow before him as though for an oriental monarch - Bagoas does not only consider them old-fashioned, as Alexander himself does, but insolent, uncouth, and disloyal, as well as entirely irrational.

And then, midway through the book, the limits of Bagoas' vision came into focus a little more clearly. Alexander *is* committing hubris, and most dreadfully - claiming that his deeds outshine those of Herakles and Dionysus is a blasphemy that would shock me in the most arrogant of Roman emperors. Alexander may, as Renault and Bagoas claim, want nothing more than the love and devotion of his subjects - but the devotion he wants is that due to a deity, not to an equal and citizen. Moreover, Bagoas was trained in the rites of respect and hierarchy of which he speaks so highly at the same time as his training in concubinage - at the age of *twelve*. I was impressed, at the beginning of the book, by how seriously Renault took Bagoas' trauma (in this she does not resemble Anne Rice and *The Vampire Armand*, which has some suspiciously similar plot points), but by the time Bagoas meets Alexander it has seemingly faded to the background, to be replaced with a cool professionalism and a pride in his 'work' as a concubine and courtesan. I distrust this, and thus anything Bagoas says about sexuality or power dynamics following his formalized training in the court of Darius. The moral tapestry Renault is weaving is a little more complex than that - are we really sympathizing with these tyrants, who habitually mutilate children for use as sex slaves, over the Greeks, with their wonderful 'undignified' nudity and their belief in democracy? Perhaps Alexander *should* have been murdered after making his his comrades prostrate themselves before him.

I may be reading too much into it. It is clear from the afterword of the book that Renault loves Alexander almost as much as Bagoas does - she may have been willing to excuse him both the ways in which he was Greek and the ways in which he was Persian. But I, at least, was stimulated by the ethical dialogue, by having my sympathies jolted so.

Other problems I had with the book - because the central character is a trauma survivor whose sense of his masculinity has been seriously (and literally) damaged, the exclusion of women felt even more arbitrary than it normally does. We hear Bagoas speak with anger and nuance about his own violations, as though they are serious crimes worthy of our attention as readers, but the screams of captive women being raped are referred to, more or less casually, throughout the book. I wanted to hear their stories as well, not just Bagoas'. Also, Bagoas monogamy was a mild irritation the whole time - his jealousy of Hephaiston just felt utterly *stupid*. I wanted them to have good, sympathetic conversations with one another.

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## Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Persian Boy (Alexander the Great #1), Mary Renault

The Persian Boy is a 1972 historical novel written by Mary Renault and narrated by Bagoas, a young Persian from an aristocratic family who is captured by his father's enemies, castrated, and sold as a slave to the king Darius III, who makes him his favorite. Eventually he becomes the lover and most faithful servant of Alexander the Great, who overthrew Darius and captured the Persian Empire. Bagoas' narration provides both a Persian view of the conquest and an intimate look at the personality of the conqueror. In Renault's view, Alexander's love for Bagoas influenced his desire to unite the Greek and Persian peoples. Renault also posits the notion that Alexander's relentless drive to conquer the world stemmed in part from his troubled relationship with his domineering mother, and his desire to "escape" from her influence by leading his army

ever eastward.

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### Kyle says

I used to think I despised love stories. I would wonder what was wrong with me; love stories are supposed to move us, I would think. They're supposed to make us feel things other stories cannot. So I thought. But all the "love stories" I saw were the unbelievable kind: The ridiculous caricatures on display in "romantic" comedies, the happily ever afters we were fed in fairy tales. "Where was the pain?", I would ask. Where was the suffering, and the longing. And perhaps above all, do these characters being in love provide us with anything *more*? Because of the love, are we gleaning any additional information about the people, the world, or even the metaphysical? It was a long time before I realized that the type of love stories I wanted to hear *were* out there, and when I eventually heard them they were powerful indeed.

At its heart, *The Persian Boy* is a love story, and it too is indeed a powerful one. This book is Mary Renault's second voyage into the life of Alexander the Great, and takes place historically from when he becomes king of Macedon, to his untimely death. Mary Renault takes an interesting approach to telling this story however, and the entire book is written from the point of view of Bagoas, The "Persian Boy." Bagoas was an actual historical figure; he was a eunuch, and catamite, who was originally possessed by Darius III, emperor of Persia. When Darius was no longer in the picture, Bagoas became attached to Alexander instead, and by all reasonable accounts, it was a close and loving relationship.

Because the book is from one specific angle, it is by its nature limiting, yet at the same time it allows a remarkable amount of depth. Where *Fire From Heaven* is a more "event" driven book, *The Persian Boy* is much more focused on the personal aspect of those involved. Bagoas wasn't a warrior, so many of the battles of Alexander's campaign are glossed over. Instead we get the smaller, but equally important insights into the impact those battles had on the people (particularly Alexander). Make no mistake, even though this book is from the point of view of Bagoas, it is *about* Alexander. If this were some other historical novel, by some other writer, we would get action, troop movements, and gore. And while those can be respectable things in their own right, this book gives us the gift of emotions, psychology, and subtle philosophy.

Bagoas is an extremely tortured individual. Because of his training, he exudes a calm and tranquil exterior, but on the inside he is torn apart by a whirlwind of different emotions as he realizes Alexander is a man "greater" than he; he must be shared with others, and with his own destiny. As beautiful as a dancing flame is, to grasp at it too tightly will burn the hand.

The themes in the book have no problem jumping out at the reader. The difference between true love and simple desire, honor and perfidy, courage and cowardice are all explored at great length; it's very Greek in

that respect.

Alexander has often been compared to Achilles, and Mary Renault has no problem running with that comparison in a lot of her passages. His passion for glory, his bravery, and his relationship with Hephaestion (Alexander's childhood friend and Patroklos-like figure). And yes, his self-knowing hubris is inevitably a demon to deal with as well.

While *Fire From Heaven* was a stirring book, painting a broad picture of Alexander's life and getting the chest muscles moving, *The Persian Boy* is ultimately a heart-wrenching book that gets the chest muscles imploding. Can there be love without loss and pain? Desire and jealousy, while still maintaining integrity? What does it mean to be a great man, and who exactly deserves to be remembered by history?

*The Persian Boy* is a small piece of a grand epic that we can never fully know, but it is still epic in and of itself. In the tradition of the Greek pursuit of glory and excellence, this book shines brightly in its own success.

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**twelvejan [Alexandria] says**

#### 4.5 Conquered Stars

I drew close and whispered, "*I love you, Alexander,*" and kissed him. Never mind, I thought, from whom his heart accepts it. Let it be according to his wish.

My hair had fallen on his breast. His eyes opened; his hand moved, and touched a strand, and ran it between his fingers.

He knew me. To that I will take my oath before the gods. It was to me that he bade farewell."

Despite enjoying *Fire from Heaven*, I was reluctant to continue with *The Persian Boy*. I assumed it was written in a traditional, stilted, third-person account; like the former which took me almost a month to complete it. Many months later, upon realising that TPB was actually written in a first-person account, i.e. Bagoas, I picked it up immediately. And I was truly enraptured by the brilliance of it.

Writing from Bagoas' perspective has its pros and cons. While it makes reading this a lot easier, I felt disengaged from it. I had wanted to witness Alexander's great conquests; like the Battle of Issos, Battle of Arbela, his Indian campaign, and a great many other which I couldn't remember because it was only mentioned in passing. After reading David Gemmell's *Troy* series and realising I quite dig the military tactics and battle strategies, I was hoping for that in TPB. What makes Alexander so great is him unconquered in battles and being one of the most successful commanders. I was disappointed that this significant aspect of his life was not the main focus in TPB.

The romantic aspect of TPB was not what I had expected either. Written from Bagoas' perspective, the romantic feeling felt one-sided. And perhaps, it was just that. While we witness Bagoas undying love, loyalty, and devotion towards Alexander, we only caught glimpses of his affection towards Bagoas; sweet whisperings of nothing. It was inferred that Alexander 'was in love with giving, almost to folly'. That Bagoas

was explicitly mentioned in sources as Alexander's eromenos simply puts him above the rest of his common men. But Hephaestion is in a class of his own.

At bedtime, he would talk to me of Hephaestion as if memory could give him life; what they did as boys, what he's said of this or that, how he trained his dogs. Yet I felt something unsaid; I felt his eyes when I turned away. I knew; he was thinking that his taking me had grieved Hephaestion; that he should make amends. Quietly he would put me aside, punishing himself not me, making his gift to the dead.

It was Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship I was craving for. The third-person account in *Fire from Heaven* hid no secrets that Hephaestion loved Alexander. And even if the love is, perhaps, unrequited, one could bear witness that the former did take up a large portion of his heart.

Alexander was lying flat on his back, staring upward. Suddenly he grasped Hephaestion in an embrace so fierce that it knocked the breath out of him, and said, "*Without you I should go mad.*"

"*I too without you,*" said Hephaestion with loving ardor.

Alexander did in fact went delirious shortly after Hephaestion's death; the exuberant funeral pyre, the public mourning, the attempt at raising Hephaestion to be a god. However, since this was in Bagoas' perspective, one could not witness the intense pain Alexander felt at the death of his beloved. Again, I was robbed off this.

But Alexander, he had thought in Greek. He would ask the oracle for Hephaestion to be a god.

They will mock him, I thought; they will mock him. Then I remembered; he is a deity himself already; Ammon acknowledged him. Without Hephaestion, he cannot bear even immortality.

My chatting with Alicja led to a better understanding of Renault's purpose of writing TPB in Bagoas' pov. Renault *did* focus on his major conquest of the Persian Empire, just not the way one expects it to be. And Bagoas represented that. Through his point of view, we see the boy in Alexander; his innocence in discovering the marvels of the world. Before learning more about his life, I had thought that his conquests were merely to quench his thirst for power - to be the King above all Kings; the Great King.

When we were up in the hills, he took me for an early ride, to taste, as he said, the clean air of Persia once again. I breathed it and said, "*Al'skander, we are home.*"

"*Truly. I too.*" He looked towards the folded ranges, whose peaks had had the first snowfalls. "*I'd say this only to you; shut it in your heart. Macedon was my father's country. This is mine.*"

His determination to establish a Persianate society among ALL his people; adopting the elements of the Persian dress, the prostration, the massive dowries for the mass marriage of his Macedonian senior officers to Persian noblewomen, one could infer that Alexander has a strong attachment to Persia. To promulgate his desperate attempts at marrying these two cultures together, it is imperative that this aspect of his life be told from Bagoas' perspective.

**Conclusion: This is the third time I'm mentally sobbing in public over the death of my favourite hero, while commuting to work. I was trying to pass off my sniffles for sinusitis. I know it was coming. But Renault's lyrical writing just destroyed me.**

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