



The Linguist and the Emperor: Napoleon and Champollion's Quest to Decipher the Rosetta Stone

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From Reader Review *The Linguist and the Emperor: Napoleon and Champollion's Quest to Decipher the Rosetta Stone* for online ebook

Robert says

What a disservice. This book's subject matter had a chance to be really interesting and compelling - it was little of the first, less of the second.

The title and back-cover synopsis lead the potential reader to think that this will be a story about how Champollion and Napoleon have some sort of interaction about, along with a common desire to, decipher the Rosetta Stone. More than 200+ pages in, we get a brief two page interaction between the two; we don't get a lot of background about the Rosetta Stone; we don't get any description/detail if/when Champollion reviewed the Stone; and we don't get any real sense that Napoleon knew of the Stone, or his thoughts on the Stone and its significance. So the title, like the cake, is a lie.

The writing was too cute, and tried to be clever. The writing acted like it was trying to prop up and make interesting a boring story - which it wasn't. If Meyerson had just let the story and the facts and characters speak for themselves, if he didn't try to dress it all up in this cutesy prose, it could be a much better read. The whole time reading, it felt like the story was aware of its own cleverness and style, and so into itself for being so cute and clever. What a waste. The telescoping narrative didn't help it - we spent as much time away from the title "characters" as we did with them - so the book read quickly but really disjointed at the same time. There was no progression, we were tossed around in time and story for the same reasons that the prose was like it was - to be cute and clever.

I came across this book at a local library book sale. At the time, I had just finished reading a similarly themed book, *The Professor and the Madman* by Winchester. The history of language is a pet topic of mine in literature, so when I stumbled across *The Linguist and the Emperor* I was excited and thought I found a gem. I was wrong. Where Winchester's work is all solid, Meyerson's is all puffery. The gap in quality between those two books is astoundingly great.

Ellie Franzmeier says

Took an interesting story and made it impossible to follow. The author would take weird leaps in time and location, so I never fully understood where everyone was and what they were doing.

Clint Joseph says

And here we have another of the "let's cram these two things together and see if it makes a book" type books. It's not a bad thing necessarily, but it didn't pull it off quite like *The Professor and the Madman*, for instance. You basically get a bit about Champollion and a bit about Bonaparte and since they were both alive in France at the same time, you just have to accept that that is a strong enough connection.

Not that that's always bad. You get enough about Napoleon to have your interest piqued, and you learn about a guy who nobody could probably name off the top of their heads. Or at least, I know I personally have never been like, "Rosetta Stone? Oh yeah, Champollion." However, don't expect to walk away from this with a real

strong grasp on either one.

Personally, this felt like an appetizer type book, and given its length and language and readability to the uninitiated (raises hand), it's a decent read. I will note, though, that the whole "deciphering of the Rosetta Stone" gets about a page's worth of coverage. I don't know if I like that or not. When you're talking about how one guy mastered a bunch of ancient languages and then pieced together a theory of hieroglyphics, I suppose it is difficult to write it in a way dumb people will understand (raises hand again).

So, really, it was a tough spot and Meyerson did a decent job of putting something together. It's light, pretty much in every top listed in the title and subtitle, but then again, that's to be assumed by a book on these topics that is under 300 pages.

Philip says

I liked a lot of things about this book. And I wanted to like this book. But in the end I couldn't manage to.

I find the topic fascinating, and I really like how he weaves together the lives of Champollion and Napoleon, showing their connected threads through history, and tying both to the distant past as well. The book seemed well-researched, too, turning up facts I'd not encountered in several other books on similar topics.

But in the end, I found the writing style was too much for me. It seemed overblown, excessively dramatic, and left me with the sense that the division between real events and the fictional isle was a blurry one at best. But more than anything, it was just obnoxious. I found it exhausting to read. I read much of this book on a plane to Mexico, and when I customs official perused the book as he searched my bag, I offered it to him, because I didn't feel like ever seeing it again (he turned it down). I've still got about 20% left, but I haven't gotten up the ambition to tackle it again. Too bad for a book that seemed to have a lot of promise and clearly is the product of a lot of research.

(I also accidentally posted this same review for the same book with the author's name misspelled)

Regina Lindsey says

I selected this book because it appeared to be about the lives of two men, Napoleon and Champollion, who were responsible for the discovery of the Rosetta Stone and its eventual role in deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. The story is about the lives of these two men; however, the Rosetta Stone plays a minor role in the last two chapters.

The writing style gives many historical non-fiction readers heartburn. First, there are no notes and only a few sources listed. Secondly, the writing style is hyperbolic in nature with very odd metaphors chosen. The story is written in a very odd, disjointed manner that never really establishes a flow. Finally, the amount of exclamation marks on almost every page almost drove me insane.

There are some good points. Meyerson does provide an interesting psychological look at Napoleon building a case for influences that shaped his future. There are interesting vignettes of more obscure historical characters that contributed, even if often by accident, to events in the story. However, due to the writing style by the time you figured out the point of the disruption in the story you may feel a bit frustrated. Meyerson does an excellent job of bringing Champollion's passion for linguistics to life

Anne says

Excellent story intertwining the lives of Bonaparte and Champollion. My only regret is there is no conclusion; the tale ends abruptly. The storytelling and snippets on people were entertaining. This could've been made into a larger story.

I would've liked more of the meeting between Champollion and Bonaparte, considering that is the title of the book.

Esther Espeland says

This book was so boring! And as a historical text poorly done, where were the sources??

Ted Arrington says

As a historian, I cannot bear the historical present tense except in small doses. But the worst offense Dr. Meyerson makes is not checking his facts. About halfway through the book he notes that the last king of Egypt, Farouk, died in a Naples restaurant in the 1960s. Professor Meyerson provides a few other lurid details, but when I went to research King Farouk, I found that he had died in Rome, not Naples, not even close to Naples. Such a colossal error so easily verified made me question the rest of Professor Meyerson's 'facts', but I do not have the time to fact check the entire book. Nor should I have to.

In spite of the aforementioned issue of his tenses, I was enjoying the book, but this spoiled it for me. Now I do not know how much of the story is conflated or fabricated or simply sloppy history.

The author blurb says that Meyerson has taught writing at Columbia, at New York University, and at Bennington College. Does he not teach his students to check their facts?

Mary says

Since I have always had an interest in code-breaking, I had looked forward to reading this book. What a disappointment! Although the author has taught writing at several universities, 1CThe Linguist and the Emperor 1D is, in my opinion, horribly written. First of all, the story is told in the present tense which led me to wonder whether its intended audience was 4th or 5th graders. The language used is overblown and flowery (with some exceptions such as when he writes that, 1CJacques is pissing against the wind. 1D) The narrative is rambling, shifting in time and topic almost at random, briefly touching on seemingly unrelated topics and then, without any apparent rhyme or reason, suddenly shifting away to others like flickering images from an old-time movie. Given the subtitle 19s reference to the Rosetta Stone, I waded through page after page wishing the book would GET TO THE POINT. But the actual treatment of the deciphering of the stone is only briefly touched upon (and then only amid digressions to other matters) in the last 20 pages.

Andrea says

While I enjoyed the dramatic details of the major characters, the historian in me was left asking questions, "Where was he, what was he doing, where is the chronological detail?" It needed maps, schematics, pictures to illustrate better the story as it unfolded. Documentation from literary sources would have been a great help. Perhaps if the descriptions had been better developed?

It gave us tantalizing points of interest on the characters that were never fulfilled, yet this limited view has enticed me further. The pedestrian discussion of hieroglyphs in the final chapter were the best moments of the book-they should have been the major items. Even the moments of discovery of the Rosetta Stone were disappointing-wow, this should have been the CLIMAX! The fact that there was no picture of the stone was crushing. What about a few pictures of Champollion's notes? If the book had settled on whether it was a character study, historical recount or linguistic study (or had tried harder at all three) it would have better met the goal.

Philip says

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Quinn says

If you decide to read this, keep in mind that it's **not** primarily a book about deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. It's more of a character sketch of Napoleon and Champollion, and the world around them. The actual decipherment of the script is mostly dealt with in a dozen or so rushed pages at the very end.

Robert Swanson says

Picked up from the exchange shelf on the Aggressor II in Palau.

An interesting idea and approach buried under many layers of obfuscation, non-linear telling, rumors and uninteresting tangents. Only in the final chapter tells about the hieroglyphs. There isn't even a picture or

diagram of the Rosetta Stone (or even much of a description).

A waste of time and paper. If it was a digital book it would have been a waste of bits.

Emily Davis-Hale says

Seriously underwhelming. The whole thing feels like a weak buildup to a nonexistent climax, which is really a shame given how exciting the whole endeavor — from the conquest of Egypt to the hieroglyphs' decipherment — could be with the right authorial touch.

Camilla says

Blah. I love history books, and I definitely enjoyed the tidbits of life facts for both Napoleon and Champollion, but...blah. This book took me a crazy long time to get through because it featured what I can only imagine were these interconnected quilt-like snippets of text pieced haphazardly together. A brief translation of some Coptic script, a letter from Champollion, Napoleon's inner anxieties all swirled together in a vague prose that rendered me confused and irritated. I was not a fan of the writing style to the point that I could not enjoy the story. The organization was not my favorite either. In all, I'd be interested in reading a more in-depth book about these two characters by a different historian.
