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**Book Selector**

‘Reading is one of the most satisfying of all human skills. We can survive - people do survive - perfectly well without it - and yet many would list it high among the things which make life worth living. Even such eager readers, however, can be daunted by the sheer number of books on offer. Libraries and bookshelves are stuffed with treasures; like explorers in some vast, land-markless new continent, we hardly know where to turn.’ **Bloomsbury good reading guide.**

This is best experienced to my mind in historical fiction where the reader is lured into a seductive past in an escape from the wretchedness of contemporary life to experience a fantasised splendor of the past. Of course, there are various types of historical fiction and a vast area of the past is covered. Here the concentration centres on novels set in the ancient world and gives a briefing of a few of the novels in the genre. But first let’s look at the background of the historical novel itself.

History is more than facts and dates, war, battles, and political fortune. History is people - thinking, doing, and dying. Historical fiction is that genre of literature that weaves a fictionalised human story around and through actual historical events and eras. In worthwhile historical fiction the ‘history’ is well researched and accurate and drives the story. The author will generally write in conversational English that today’s readers can relate to.

Reading historical fiction enlivens dead facts, while at the same time engaging the reader in a story that thrills, chills, entertains, provokes, stimulates, and titillates - just as a good story should.

Through historical fiction, the reader can be present at an historical event or period, thereby connecting to people and events. The reader learns interesting bits and pieces of information that makes the period seem real.

Historical fiction can thus be defined as a narrative in novel form, set in a particular period in history or based on an event which actually happened, with characters that may or may not have existed, whose feelings, words and actions are reconstructed and to some degree imagined by the author. This definition demonstrates both the strength and the weakness of the genre. The main strength of historical fiction is that at least some of the details in the novel are historically accurate. The degree of accuracy, like in historical non-fiction depends on the author’s attention to detail. It is not the genre, but the choices of the author that determines the accuracy of the details. This is also one of the main drawbacks. A bad author can misuse the facts and give the reader a false impression of history.

As the reader does not want to wade through dense historical text, there is also the problem of providing just enough facts or face the book being dismissed as boring. Therefore it is of utmost importance that historical novels provide accurate, convincing portraits of the people of the past, in short, it should make the past live. In this way historical fiction can be considered a wonderful and fun way to learn about history.

Let us look at a selection of novels that best reflect and convey the majesty of the ancient world, using both recent and older literature. I have divided these titles under Biblical, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

## Biblical

Historical literature featuring characters from the Bible has always been successful as seen in the works of authors such as Frank Slaughter (**Song of Ruth, The crown and the cross**) and Lloyd C Douglas (**The robe, The big fisherman**, et cetera). So successful that many of these titles ended up being filmed by Hollywood.

This trend is continued by modern authors as in the case of Orson Scott Card in his *Women of Genesis* series (**Rebekah, Sarah**, et cetera) that features women from the Old Testament.

The Biblical flood and the story of Noah is refreshingly told in David Maine's **The flood** in an original blend of biblical history and wondrous imagination. Written with a humorous touch, it conveys an original modern tone to the story.

Ellen Gunderson Traylor, another author of Biblical novels, writes about **Esther** and **Samson** in a readable and entertaining manner.

Alan Gold in his gripping tale about the wife of Ahab in **Jezebel** provides a thought-provoking re-telling of the life and times of the controversial Phoenician princess. This is a clever adaptation of a biblical situation that allows the reader some room for thought.

Anita Diamant again in **The red tent** interweaves biblical tales with events and characters of her own invention re-creating the life of Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob. The red tent is the place where women of the tribe visit to give birth or have their monthly periods.

## Ancient Egypt

Moving on to ancient Egypt, the French bestseller author Christian Jacq comes to mind, having already established a name and following in his various translated series such as **Ramses: the son of the light**, et cetera. All these titles are a pleasure to read even though the main characters are sometimes a bit too naïve and the script a bit clumsy.

Author Pauline Gedge wrote a wonderful trilogy called *Lord of the two lands* relating the story of an Egyptian royal family's courage and determination to free Egypt from the tyrannical rule of the Hyksos rulers. This very much resembles

the flowing storyline of the Christian Jacq titles and can be recommended.

She also wrote an excellent fictional biography of the controversial Queen Hatshepsut under the title **Child of the morning**.

Even local best-selling author Wilbur Smith had a bash at setting a novel in ancient Egypt as seen in **River god**.

Paul Doherty in his *Ancient Egyptian mysteries* series presents a gripping historical crime series set in ancient Egypt (**The mask of Ra, The Anubis slayings**, et cetera).

Duncan Sprott's **The house of the eagle**, first title in *The Ptolemies Quartet* series covers the rule of the Ptolemy pharaohs in Egypt. Not as easy a read as the Jacq series, but worth considering.

One of my all time favourite novels is **The Egyptian** by Mika Waltari, certainly a classic of its times. It is the story of Sinuhe the Egyptian in search of inner peace during the unstable times of Pharaoh Akhenaton.

## Ancient Greece

Now on to ancient Greece where an author that best reflects it in recent times is the Italian author Valerio Massimo Manfredi, firstly for his best-selling *Alexander* trilogy and stand-alone titles such as **Spartan, The talisman of Troy** and **Tyrant**. All are epic in scale and extremely gripping.

A favourite novel that covers the fall of Troy and Trojan princess Cassandra is the Marion Zimmer Bradley title **The fire-brand**.

Michael Curtis Ford in **The ten thousand** offers a unique view of the brutality and heroism of 5th century BC Greek warfare when Greek mercenary troops battled their way home from Persia through Asia.

A critically acclaimed novel on **Achilles** by Elizabeth Cook is a brilliant retelling of the plight of one of Homer's heroes, geared for the more literary reader. Of course we must not forget about the novels of the late Mary Renault whose titles such as **The King must die, The bull from the sea** and her *Alexander* trilogy are all worthy of re-reading.

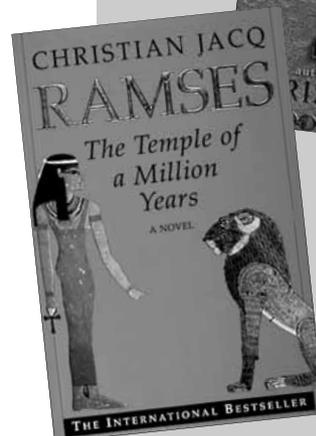
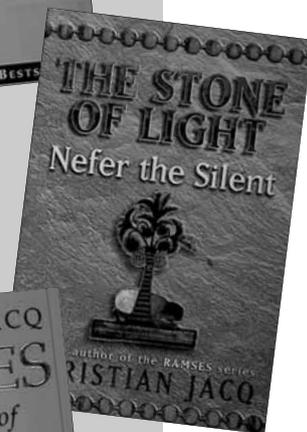
## Ancient Rome

Two titles that immediately grab my attention when thinking of ancient Rome are Robert Graves's gripping chronicles of

imperial intrigue as seen in **I, Claudius** and **Claudius the God** (both the video and DVD is in stock).

Readers who enjoy Christian Jacq and Valerio Manfredi will enjoy the fairly recent fictionalised life of Julius Caesar in Conn Iggulden's *Emperor* series. But Colleen McCullough had already done this in her bulky and demanding *Masters of Rome* series.

Loosely based on the writings of Julius Caesar and other sources is the novel **The druid king** by Norman Spinrad which centres around the Gallic chieftain, Vercingetorix, who fiercely battled the Roman legions led by Julius Caesar. Another title that covers the Roman expansion of power in Britain is the epic Pauline Gedge novel, **The eagle and the**



**raven.** This title features well-known British figures of ancient history such as Boadicea. This famous Iceni queen who lead her people against the might of Rome also features in the fairly recent *Manda Scott* trilogy.

An extremely gripping historical adventure set during the same period is David Wishart's **The horse coin**. Jules Watson in his half-historical/part-fantasy title **The white mare**, first of the *Dalraida* trilogy, features Roman expansionism during 79 AD in the northern Britain/Scotland areas where an Irish prince tries to unite the local tribes in a unified defense.

One of the well-regarded authors around is Allan Massie, who in his *The Matter of Eternal Rome* series covers the Roman Empire during its declining years. Written for the more sophisticated middlebrow reader it proves informative, entertaining, and well realised. Michael Curtis Ford covers more or less the same topic in a much readable package in his **Gods & legions** about a young scholar in Athens being promoted to Caesar of the Western Empire only to prove himself a military genius. Something much in the same manner is **The last legion** written by Valerio Massimo Manfredi covering the exploits of a handful of ex-Roman legionaries on a mission to rescue the thirteen-year-old emperor, Romulus. It is brilliantly told and extremely entertaining.

Wallace Breem's re-issued novel **Eagle in the snow** provides a magnificent panorama of a splintering Roman empire set on the Rhine frontier during the year 406, where a single Roman legion has to defend Rome's frontiers against barbarian invasion. Another Wallace Breem title recently bought is **The legate's daughter** revolving around the rescue of the kidnapped niece of a Roman senator, but filled with political intrigue in 24 BC Rome.

One must not forget old titles such as Miika Waltari's **The Etruscan** and **The Roman** that were popular in their day. Also author Frank Slaughter who wrote a very readable fictional biography on Constantine.

The above-mentioned novels only skim the surface of the genre and further titles may be found in the accompanying booklist selection.

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