

# **The Beacon at Alexandria Short Guide**

## **The Beacon at Alexandria by Gillian Bradshaw**

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# Characters

The protagonist, Charis, is a highly intelligent young woman with an extraordinary devotion to the healing profession. The interest, first discovered during childhood and confirmed by her reading of Hippocrates, leads her to go to Alexandria (Egypt) and undertake formal medical study. At that time a woman was not permitted to do such things, so Charis poses as Chariton, a eunuch. Bradshaw portrays how Charis responds to a variety of situations which challenge her self-imposed role. Charis's deepest problem is actually her own longing for marriage and a family, an emotional need which she represses in favor of her medical career.

The Jewish physician, Philon, with whom she undertakes her apprenticeship, is not only a successful doctor with a full grasp of the medical knowledge of the time, but also a considerate and caring person. A family man, who follows his Jewish religion faithfully, he is also tolerant of other beliefs and welcomes the young Christian into his service. He is patient, reacting calmly to the many crises that come his way.

One of the most striking characterizations in the novel is that of the venerable bishop, Athanasios. Bradshaw convincingly humanizes this historical figure, whose doctrines are well-known but whose personality is lost to time.

He is a complex figure, neither saint nor tyrant, but with characteristics both saintly and tyrannical. As Charis's patient, he demonstrates tremendous moral strength in a context of physical weakness. A powerful and highly acclaimed figure in the religious world, he warns Charis that acclamation intoxicates the will. But even as his death approaches, he continues to receive and treasure acclaim. In a moving scene, Athanasios (whose name means "deathless") dies in tranquil faith of a heavenly reward.

Several other characters populate this novel, some minor and associated with a specific setting, and others of greater importance. Charis's initial departure from Ephesus is in part occasioned by her family's insistence that she marry Festinus, who is portrayed as an obnoxious individual.

Charis corresponds with her brother, Thorion, but we see him almost entirely through her eyes. Athanaric, the imperial agent of Sardica, whose life Charis saves, proves to be an intelligent and sensitive young man, worthy of her devotion. Overall, minor characters are closely associated with their milieu, so that the individual Romans and Goths, for example, are typical rather than highly individualized.



## Social Concerns/Themes

The *Beacon at Alexandria* is rich in its thematic import for the contemporary reader. Bradshaw presents the extraordinarily complex Hellenistic world in carefully researched detail and reveals surprising parallels with modern society. One of the striking similarities is the multiracial character of society. The protagonist, Charis, is born at Ephesus but leaves home for Alexandria, the intellectual center of the time. Interested in studying medicine, she becomes apprenticed to a prominent Jewish physician. Bradshaw uses her experiences to explore the coexistence of the Jewish and Christian communities. Later in the novel, Charis journeys to Thrace, where she encounters the Visigoths, whose barbaric reputation among the Romans turns out to be somewhat exaggerated.

Religious factionalism is another important social concern in *The Beacon at Alexandria*. Charis becomes involved in the politics of the Christian church.

She becomes the personal physician of the aging Archbishop Athanasios, whose eventual death unleashes violence in the historical dispute between his followers and those of his rival, Arian.

Another social theme important to Bradshaw is society's attitude toward women. Charis finds that in order to study medicine in Alexandria, she must disguise her gender and pretend to be a eunuch. The prevailing attitude, expressed by several major characters in the book, is that the medical profession is inappropriate for women. Ironically, when Charis finds herself among the Goths, she discovers that in that supposedly unenlightened society, women are traditionally regarded as the proper healers.

Not only are the details of medical practice at this time fascinating in themselves, but Bradshaw presents the social issues that revolve around medical practice. Questions of euthanasia, of which patients should get priority treatment, and of the relationship of health to lifestyle all enter into the narrative. Such matters as the casual use of opium to relieve pain and as a tranquilizer also touch upon current medical issues.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The *Beacon at Alexandria* is a thoroughly researched historical novel. The two principal approaches to writing historical fiction are either to choose an actual historical personage and recreate that character in its time or to create a fictional character in the particular historical period and incorporate historical figures into the narrative. Bradshaw has chosen the second approach, which gives her greater flexibility and range. By creating an original protagonist who is a woman, Bradshaw is able to incorporate a feminist perspective in a historical scene. Particularly interesting is the friendship that develops between Charis and the dying Archbishop, who would have been horrified if he had known he was being treated by a woman.

Bradshaw uses a first person narration, which, although restrictive, works well in *The Beacon at Alexandria* because Charis is always the center of the narrative. In her role of physician she meets important historical characters and travels widely. Her diverse experiences provide a multifaceted view of this ancient society.

Unlike Bradshaw's earlier Arthurian trilogy, which was also historically accurate, this novel does not include elements of myth or fantasy. Accordingly, the dialogue is more realistic, even colloquial, and convincingly depicts life in the late Roman Empire.



## Related Titles

The sequels to *The Beacon at Alexandria* are *The Bearkeeper's Daughter*, 1987 (please see separate entry) and *Imperial Purple*, 1988. *Imperial Purple* is also set in Constantinople in the fifth century A.D. The protagonist is a gifted young woman silk weaver, Demetrias, who lives in the city of Tyre, but who is kidnapped and taken to Constantinople when she is given the order to weave a cloak of imperial purple, forbidden for ordinary mortals to wear. After many life and freedom-threatening adventures in the vividly depicted Eastern Roman city, she embarks on yet another purple robe, this one commissioned by the Empress Pulcheria.



# Copyright Information

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