

# The Bearkeeper's Daughter Short Guide

## The Bearkeeper's Daughter by Gillian Bradshaw

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# Characters

The protagonist of *The Bearkeeper's Daughter* is John, illegitimate son of the Byzantine Empress Theodora. Bradshaw bases his figure on the writings of the historian Procopius, whose *Secret History* contains much material, mostly discredited, about the emperor Justinian and his time. According to Procopius, John was ordered killed by the empress, but Bradshaw's fictional account leaves him alive and eminently successful at the end of the narrative.

Actually John is an excellent choice for the novel's central character. His ambiguous position, close to the inner circle of rule but outside of it, makes him an ideal observer and commentator. A man of many talents, John takes a job as secretary to the head chamberlain of the court, where his accounting and shorthand skills, and his command of several languages, make him an instant success. Later in the novel, he demonstrates his skilled horsemanship, and when called upon to command a military operation, performs capably.

He is reticent to expose his true identity, since it might impugn the reputation of the empress, and this tends to restrain him in discourse. In fact his conversations reveal more about others than about himself. Even when he falls in love he is unable to express his genuine feelings.

The two women in John's life are more sharply characterized. Bradshaw gives a detailed portrait of the Empress Theodora. A woman who overcomes a notorious past as courtesan and actress to reign in regal splendor, Theodora is both admirable and despicable. Even her son admits at her death that he loves her as his mother but must despise her as a tyrant. She demands humiliating obeisance from her subjects; all must approach her on knees and kiss her extended foot. She shows extreme favoritism in her political influence and is capable of inflicting cruel punishment when angered. On the other hand, she takes an almost childish delight in the ceremony and regalia of her role. She loves riding in her gilded chariot, wearing her imperial purple cloak, and her eyes glitter with pleasure when the people on the streets shout their acclaim. This remarkable woman faces death heroically, making a secret of the illness that is rapidly killing her.

The other woman who is important to John is Euphemia, a young aristocrat who treats him with arrogant disdain.

John, however, falls in love with her, although he is unable to tell her of his feelings. She is depicted as nervous and rarely at ease. The fact that her father is a disgraced official makes her position in society difficult. She possesses valuable files left behind by her father when he fled to Egypt, and she hopes to use them to win favor at court. Her role in the novel is less that of romantic object than of political pawn. She cannot admit her own attraction to John until she restores her credibility at court.



Several of the male roles represent different levels of command in the complicated structure of empire. The effectively drawn military leader Belisarius is a brilliant strategist, as well as a married man with domestic concerns.

The Armenian Artabanus is an ambitious politician whose bold schemes sometimes backfire. Perhaps the most individualized of these male characters is the chamberlain, Narses. This quiet, powerful man is a eunuch, but his stature at court raises him above that usually lowly position. He is skilled in politics, finances, and personal diplomacy, and also proves a genuine friend to John, whom he hires as his personal secretary.

The emperor Justinian does not enter into much of the novel's action although his presence is forceful, and his appearance in key scenes is dramatically effective. He adores his wife, whom he rescued from a scandalous life, but he is capable of enormous cruelty to those who threaten him. At one point he orders John viciously flogged. Yet he is the originator of one of the world's most important documents on law and justice.



## Social Concerns

Set in sixth-century Constantinople, *The Bearkeeper's Daughter* is another Bradshaw novel that deals with the complex societies of the late Hellenistic world. Again the milieu is multiracial and multicultural, giving it a decidedly modern flavor. The teeming city of Constantinople is a meeting place of East and West, of Arab, Persian, Slav, Armenian, Roman, and Herul. The society is one of surface harmony, but tensions lurk beneath a facade of prosperity and glamour. In this novel Bradshaw draws attention to the role of religion in politics, expressed by the split between the eastern and western orthodoxies of the powerful Christian church. This is also a society that practices slavery. The social hierarchy thus extends from the pinnacle of tyrannical power, represented by Emperor Justinian and his empress Theodora, to the depths of the slave who is bought and sold as property.

The complex role of women in this society is seen largely in the character of Theodora, whose meteoric ascent from bearkeeper's daughter to empress illustrates the rare but real opportunities for success open to a talented but not overly scrupulous woman.

Bradshaw also addresses the subject of military prowess, especially as it relates to horsemanship. One of the lesser known facts about the early struggle between East and West is the central role of military horsemanship.

As Bradshaw points out, not only did the various breeds have differing strategic capabilities, but riding styles varied considerably. The protagonist, John, who is from the eastern province of Arabia, reveals his identity as an Arab by the way he mounts and rides his horse. In a modern world preoccupied with nuclear capability, it is interesting to see the fate of nations dependent on equine prowess.

The silk trade is of major importance in the novel. One of the empress's great achievements is the theft of silk worms from Asia, making it possible for silk to be woven in Constantinople rather than being imported. In commerce as well as in war and politics, *The Bearkeeper's Daughter* demonstrates that although the names of the pieces have changed, the game of international rivalry and survival remains essentially the same. Similarly, on the home front the careers of talented young men like the protagonist become part of the intricate web of this far-reaching political game.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Bearkeeper's Daughter, like its predecessor, *The Beacon at Alexandria* (1986), is well-researched historical fiction that imaginatively presents a graphic picture of a relatively littleknown period. Bradshaw avoids archaic language, and both descriptions and dialogue use a modern style, which successfully evokes the ancient scene.

Unlike *The Beacon at Alexandria*, this novel does not use first-person narration. Although Bradshaw presents the viewpoint of John throughout the novel, she uses a third-person narrative voice. When she wants to communicate John's private thoughts, she does so in italicized passages. This produces an effective balance of objective and subjective narration.

Bradshaw's approach to historical fiction is somewhat similar to that of Mary Renault, whose novels about ancient Greece use the modern idiom to evoke that culture and its myths.

## Related Titles

The Bearkeeper's Daughter continues Bradshaw's realistic reconstruction of the Hellenistic world begun in *The Beacon at Alexandria*. Although the works are not continuous — a two-century gap as well as a shift in setting separate them — they are similar in approach, technique, and style.



# Copyright Information

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