Fortune's Favorites Short Guide

Fortune's Favorites by Colleen McCullough

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

While The First Man in Rome (1990) is Marius's book, and The Grass Crown (1991) is Sula's book, Fortune's Favorites is Caesar's book. This is the Caesar whom Shakespeare will immortalize sixteen hundred years later, and McCullough paints him in detail. We first saw him in The Grass Crown as an unwilling Flamen Dialis, the high priest of Jupiter, given that stultifying and restrictive office by the now-mad Gaius Marius in his blood-soaked seventh consulate. As Flamen Dialis, Caesar is hemmed in by "shibboleths" and religious prescriptions that will make it impossible for him to achieve greatness, as he, at a young age, knows he must — and as Gaius Marius knew, as well, from the Syrian sibyl Martha. In the latest novel Caesar breaks free of the flaminate, though, essentially by winning a battle of wills with Sulla. In Caesar, Sulla sees one who is as great, as willful, and as ruthless as himself.

Caesar in this novel begins to show himself as a military, political, and intellectual force to be reckoned with.

He charms the elderly King Nicomedes of Bythinia and his Queen, gaining in the process a reputation — unfounded — for sleeping with the old King (as Caesar is quite handsome, the rumors are hard to quash). He makes his military career in a variety of manners, as a hunter and crucifier of pirates, as a private citizen leading colonial troops against Mithridates' army, and as a logistic genius. He leads a legion of the Fimbriani, toughened veterans, to victory against rebellious Mytilene, winning the Corona Civica — the Civic Crown — as a result — only one step lower than the Grass Crown that Sulla had won. An irresistible ladies' man (even though he requires all his lovers to be spotlessly clean), he seduces Mithridatidis Nyssa, virgin wife of the Egyptian regent and daughter of Rome's foe Mithridates of Pontus, and embarks, with the approval of his mother, Aurelia, upon a campaign of sleeping with the wives of Rome's most important men, in order to further his political prospects (and quash the rumors of his homosexuality). Although at the end of the novel he loses his wife and son in childbirth and his beloved Aunt Julia (widow of Gaius Marius) to old age, his star is still rising.

The Sulla we see in this novel is a vastly different Sulla than in the previ cms two books. Sulla, in the east, while fighting Mithridates, contracts a horrible skin disease which leaves him terribly disfigured. In addition, he has gained, then lost, a tremendous amount of weight, as well as lost all his teeth.

In an attempt to alleviate the agony of his skin ailment, he has become an alcoholic. His ruthless nature has been intensified; from being handsome, attractive, and ruthless, he is now simply quite monstrous, and it is not too far a step for him to order the deaths of thousands of people in the proscriptions. He sees his previous incarnation as one of "fortune's favorites" as a bitter irony. His son — perhaps the only human he ever loved — has died many years before; his third wife Dalmatica, for whom he cared a great deal, dies during a false pregnancy. The only thing keeping Sulla alive is the prospect of his eventual retirement. When this occurs, even this, a planned long debauch, is not what Sulla had wished; after only a few months, he dies terribly, choking on his own

blood, watched and mourned only by his fourth wife and his former lover, the tragic actor Metrobius.

Aurelia is the only one in the novel to mourn Sulla's death. She is still the same common-sense beauty seen in the first two novels; however, the death of her husband, Caesar's father, and the vicissitudes of the Sullan government and the need to keep Caesar on his path to greatness have taken a toll on her; although beloved by the Subura, the lower-class neighborhood where she, although wealthy, chooses to live, she is cool, aloof-seeming, unable for reasons of discipline and love to show that very love to her son, whom she must temper against all sorts of hardships (his having been related to Gaius Marius not the least among them).

Aurelia does not even bend for Caesar, for whom she lives.

Pompey is perhaps the strangest character in the novel, for his opinion of himself is so high and unshakable that it goes beyond mere egoism into the realm of the near-bizarre. A New Man whose father was a consul, Pompey has no wish to join the Senate and play political games, but he desires to have military and later political power.

As a result, he is taught a hard lesson in Spain by Sertorius, but, combined with the levelheaded Metellus Pius, eventually defeats him. Pompey then seeks the office of consul — without ever having been in any of the offices required of a consul, without even having been in the Senate, which he disdains. With Caesar's assistance, he gains the consulate, although it is plain that the cursus honorum — the series of offices leading to consul and censor — is not his style or birthright. Toward the end of the novel, Pompey is looking suspiciously like another Gaius Marius.

Social Concerns

Fortune's Favorites brings us through the time of the dictatorship of Lucius Cornelius Sulla in Ancient Rome. Sulla returns from fighting Mithridates of Pontus in Asia and has defeated Cinna and Carbo in their attempts to take over the Roman republic, and backed by his loyal army, is determined to return the Republic to its patricianruled roots. To do this, Sulla instigates the infamous proscriptions; lists of men who are declared enemies of the state, or outlaw, are placed in public view, declaring that anyone who kills such a man will be given a reward. Money flows into the depleted Roman treasury from the sales of the huge estates and possessions of those who are proscribed. Sulla embarks on a program of radical and regressive reform of the Republic; among other things, he handpicks the consuls, requires the Senate to pass legislation he stipulates, and effectively, through this legislation, reduces the power of the plebs and knights, restoring the power of the patriciate. In effect, Sulla destroys all vestige of the seven consulates of Gaius Marius, who was once his political and military leader.

The hoped for effect of the Sullan reforms is a return to the Roman government and ways of old; the effect is quite the opposite. By wresting power unto himself as absolute ruler, Sulla is uncrowned King of Rome, a role which would have horrified the traditional patriciate seen in The First Man in Rome.

Indeed, the patriciate seen in Fortune's Favorites is no longer the patriciate of Scaevola, Catulus Caesar, Gaius Julius Caesar Nepos, Scaurus, or Publius Rutilius Rufus — the pillars of Rome in the earlier novel. Men such as Crassus, Lucius Licinius Lucullus, Verres, and Dolabella are in positions of power, but are characterized primarily by their venality and corruption — financial as well as moral. And the Sullan proscriptions simply cheapen the worth of a person's life; Sulla's net brings in many of the innocent as well as the alleged guilty. The overall social and political result is a Rome that generates demagogues and military rulers — Brutus, Pompey, Gaius Julius Caesar — who wrestle for control of Rome. In Fortune's Favorites, we see the rapid increase in the decline of the Roman Republic.

Techniques

McCullough uses the epistolary method again in this novel, as in the past two, but not as intensively as in the first one. The enormous amount of background material is still present, and McCullough is nothing if not meticulous about providing the reader plenty of understanding of why the relationships between various counties are the way they are in the novel (this historical background is very evident in The Grass Crown, as well, especially when references are made to the Hellenized kingdoms and regions of Asia Minor, as happens quite frequently in the latter two novels). The glossary is still present as well, although it is shorter than in the previous two novels, and contains updated material. In general, McCullough tries no new techniques in the third Roman novel; in all three she manages to make Republican Rome and its affairs seem real and immediate by the colloquial diction she gives her characters, and detailed character study.

Themes

The most obvious theme in Fortune's Favorites is that of fortune and destiny — to greatness, disaster, or obscurity.

Most of the major characters — Caesar, Sulla, Pompey, Spartacus, and Sertorius — are described as either being one of "fortune's favorites" or having been completely abandoned by fortune.

Sulla, who had previously nicknamed himself Felix (lucky), loses his luck — his beloved son has already died; his wife dies in a welter of horrible omens; he dies a deformed and largely unmourned alcoholic. Sertorius, Gaius Marius's cousin who led a rebellious semi-kingdom in the Spanish provinces, loses his luck when he is confronted by Pompey, whose luck, along with that of Caesar, is ascendant. Indeed, Caesar is the most obvious of fortune's favorites in the novel; while it may be an exaggeration to say that he can do no wrong, he is clearly in the ascendant; he is largely beloved, more intelligent than all, and a particular favorite with women.

Key Questions

In the third Roman novel we see a marked difference in the tenor of characters and events; although Caesar and his associates seem to think that Rome is on her feet again, events may prove otherwise, and the road to this seeming rehabilitation has been an extremely rocky one. What, then, are the signs that Roman politics and society are in dangerous or bad shape? Look at the foreign affairs as well as the internal affairs. What does the Spartacan slave uprising tell us about Roman attitudes toward individual freedom and liberty?

1. Is Pompey really as guileless as he seems, or is there method behind his seemingly endless ego? What does his election to the office of consul tell us about the shape of Roman politics at this stage?

2. What is there about Caesar's character and actions that shows us that he is destined for greatness, that he is truly one of "fortune's favorites"?

3. Is the incredibly wealthy Crassus a character to be admired or despised?

Whose interests does he have at heart: his own or Rome's?

4. Discuss the marked difference in the way that slaves, servants, and other family retainers treat and are treated by their owners/masters and mistresses (e.g., Caesar/Servilia; Germanicus/ Chrysogonus).

5. There is quite a bit of interaction between Roman and Hellenized Asian society in the novel. What do their actions toward each other and treatment of each other tell you about each society?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

(See notation above and in the separate analysis of The First Man in Rome for literary precedents and discussion of the historical novel genre).

Related Titles

Fortune's Favorites continues the saga of the Gaius Marius-Sulla-Caesar-Pompey line of Roman rulers begun in The First Man in Rome. Fortune's Favorites differs in that, as McCullough states in an afterword to the novel, it begins the process of providing less of the broad sweep of the history of Mediterranean civilization, and begins to focus more on Rome and the fall of its republic.

The epistolary techniques are still in the novel, but are fewer than in The First Man in Rome — Publius Rufus is both a more frequent and more literate correspondent than Pompey, whose few missives are blunt and to the point and rhetorically inept.

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