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Jane Bingham , Robin Lawrie , Anne Millard

# Alexander the Great

*United Kingdom (2004)*

TAGS: Alexander the Great Architecture Egypt Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy






*We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.*

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | Alexander the Great |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United Kingdom |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | United Kingdom, United States of America |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 2004 |
| *First Edition Details* | Jane Bingham, *Alexander the Great*, Usborne Young Reading 3. London: Usborne Publishing, 2004, 64 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 9780746063262 |
| *Genre* | Biographies, Historical fiction, Illustrated works, Instructional and educational works, Novels |
| *Target Audience* | Children (c. 6+) |
| *Author of the Entry* | Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk |
| *Peer-reviewer of the Entry* | Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk<br>Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au |



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## Creators



### Jane Bingham (Author)

Jane Bingham is a prolific children's author based in the UK. She has worked extensively in publishing and writing, with specialism in children's non-fiction, particularly history and art. Her titles include *Welcome to the Ancient Olympics!* and *A Time Travel Guide to the Aztec Empire* (both Heinemann-Raintree, 2007), and for adults, *A Cultural History of the Cotswolds* (Signal Books, 2009).

Source:

Profile at rlf.org.uk (accessed: March 12, 2019)

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk



### Robin Lawrie , b. 1945 (Illustrator)

Robin Lawrie is a Scottish-born artist and children's illustrator who grew up in Canada before returning to the UK as a young adult. As a freelance illustrator, he has worked for many major publishing houses, including Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Puffin, Harper Collins, Egmont, Scholastic, Usborne, MacMillan. He created the Ridge Riders mountain biking graphic novel series with his wife, the graphic designer Christine Lawrie. His illustrations have encompassed some of the most famous works of children's literature, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrob*e. He has illustrated a number of biographies written



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for children, including those of Napoleon, Sitting Bull, and a series of Scottish racing car drivers.

Source:

Official website (accessed: March 12, 2019)

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk



**Anne Millard (Historical advisor)**

History Consultant

Dr Anne Millard has a PhD in Egyptology. She is the author of a number of non-fiction historical books for children, including *From AD 1750 To AD 1914 The Age of Revolutions* (Usborne, 1979); *Usborne Book of the Ancient World* (Usborne, 1991); *Going to War in Ancient Egyp*t (Franklin Watts, 2006); *Explorers and Traders* (ed.; Weldon Owen, 2005). She has also acted as an advisor on numerous children's history books.

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk



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## Additional information

Summary

This title introduces young readers to biography and history, with elements of geography and politics, in a title that also encourages developing literacy through the use of fairly complex vocabulary and delivery in a relatively lengthy volume. The format is birth to death, following the traditions of biography. A map of Alexander's empire opens the work and orientates the reader, and this is followed by ten chapters on Alexander's life, in which text and image are interspersed; most pages are two thirds text, one third image, with the images included in a dynamic variety of positions. The text is written in the past tense in a style more akin to an informal history rather than a novel. The images are rendered in colour in a cartoon-realistic style. The illustrations are full of period detail such as armour, chitons, and horses being ridden with animal skins rather than modern saddles. Visual details of style and pattern in clothing, hairstyles, and arms and armour indicate differences between ethnic groups. The illustrations typically depict key moments in the text, sometimes with the addition of thought or speech bubbles that complement the main narrative.

The first chapter opens with the revelation that Alexander's mother told him that he was the son of a god. He vows to one day rule the world. The chapter goes on to introduce Alexander's world: Macedonia, his parents, his best friend, their pass-times, their education with Aristotle, and Alexander's taming of Bucephalus. This is followed by an account of Alexander's regency and military campaigning at sixteen. The difficulty that Alexander, "didn’t have an easy relationship" (p. 11) with his father is introduced, focused on Alexander's negative view of Philip's arrogance and his behaviour towards Olympias, Alexander's mother. The chapter closes with Philip's murder and the declaration of Alexander as king.

In Chapter Two, Alexander shows people 'who was boss,' which includes the sack of Thebes (and sparing of Pindar's house). The Greeks and Macedonians are said to have been 'sworn enemies of the Persians' for "centuries" (p. 14), so Alexander continues his father's plans to invade Persia. An account of the Battle of Granicus follows, which leads into the submission of cities, meeting Queen Ada, and cutting through the Gordian Knot.

Chapter Three opens with a rare look inside Alexander's mind, with, "'King of all Asia!' he thought". The narrative leads towards Syria,



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where Persian King Darius' army blocks the way. There is an account of the Battle of Issus, and of Alexander's amazement at the riches they capture. The meeting with Darius' family follows, including them mistaking Hephaestion for Alexander. There is an account of the campaign against Tyre and of Alexander's confident refusal of Darius' offer of truce.

Chapter Four, *Son of a God*, is an account of Alexander in Egypt. It includes the insight that it was easy to take Egypt as the Egyptians were keen for the removal of their unwelcome Persian overlords. All the Macedonians are said to have agreed that "Alexander grew more arrogant" after his visit to Siwa (p. 27). A beautiful illustration of a scroll map complements the account of the foundation of Alexandria.

Chapter Five addresses the Battle of Gaugamela and its aftermath. The sack of Persepolis is described; although Alexander is impressed by the city, he "could only think of the thousands of Macedonian soldiers who had died" (p. 35), so he gives up the city to sack in recompense to the survivors.

Chapter Six, *King of Persia* addresses some of the controversies surrounding Alexander's kingship and his attempts to blend Macedonian and Persian custom. Resentment simmers, Alexander murders his childhood friend Cleitus, and the army become scared of their king.

In Chapter Seven, Alexander's army enters Afghanistan (although the modern country's name is unmentioned). There is an account of the capture of the Sogdian Rock, Alexander's marriage to Roxanne, and the army's displeasure at it. Chapter Eight describes the campaigns in India, battle with King Porus, and the funeral of Bucephalus. Chapter Nine explores Alexander's time in India, including a description of his discussions with an Indian "wise man" who burns himself on a pyre to show Alexander that conquest is pointless. Alexander ignores him and presses on, intending to conquer China. The army rebelled, "Alexander sulked" (p. 55), then they began their return West.

Chapter Ten describes the gruelling return journey through the desert, Alexander's marriage to Darius' daughter (Statiera, who goes unnamed), and the Macedonians' discontent at being married to other Persian noblewomen. Hephaistion dies, Alexander witnesses a troubling omen, then he too dies. In a brief summary, the narrative closes with the murders of Roxanne and her son by Alexander and the



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empire collapsing in a "bloody struggle" (p. 63). A vertical text timeline entitled *My life of conquest* concludes the book; it is written in the first person ("356BC – I am born") which adds a personal touch to what is otherwise a rather impersonal story.

Analysis

This highly engaging work by a major children's publishing house makes ancient history accessible to a young readership. While there is no information on how modern people know about the life of Alexander, the work draws heavily on ancient sources (or modern works which have used ancient sources), particularly Arrian's *Campaigns of Alexander* and Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. It is fair to say that the whole way in which Alexander's story is conceived here follows the classical tradition of viewing Alexander as a case-study in the corrupting influence of power and as an exploration of the balance between excellence and arrogance. Many anecdotes from Arrian and Plutarch are used to make the same moral points/personality insights that the ancient authors made: taming Bucephalus is used to demonstrate ambition, Alexander's response to Darius' family mistaking Hephaestion for himself illustrates his capacity for charm and humility, the preservation of Pindar's house (here, misleadingly, it is implied that Pindar was still alive) suggests his capacity for restraint, the death of Cleitus demonstrates his capacity for murderous rage. Considerable amounts of dialogue from Plutarch and Arrian is included in paraphrased form, for example, when Darius offers a truce, Parmenion (here unnamed) says "I'd accept if I were you", and Alexander retorts, "So would I – if I were you!"' (for which see Plutarch, *Alexander*, 29, after Arrian, 2.26). Speech such as this is frequently delivered in speech bubbles in the illustrations. The use of speech (and, sometimes, thought-bubbles) adds immediacy to the story. The illustrations effectively reinforce the information in the text. The use of ancient material (within the text and the images) enables young people to become familiar with aspects of the ancient tradition at an early stage in their learning.

This work communicates many values to young readers. It makes a virtue of physical prowess, bravery, pushing oneself and excelling, inspiring others and leading, magnanimity, mercy, self-control, conquest and the domination of others; it also discourages aggression between peers, arrogance, and self-indulgence. There is an ambivalent representation of empire, for while each new conquest is presented as



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a success and a positive, the pursuit of empire is ultimately presented as an empty achievement that collapses with Alexander's death.

*Alexander the Great* does an effective job of communicating the exhilaration associated with Alexander's dazzling career. The cover depicts Alexander charging full tilt on his horse, sword outstretched. The pace of movement and achievement is relentless; the emphasis is placed on what-Alexander-did-next, rather than on cultural issues. One cannot read it without receiving an impression of Alexander's considerable drive, skill, and glamour. The Gordion Knot anecdote is told definitely with Alexander cutting the knot dramatically, where ancient sources variously offer cutting it (suggesting violent impulsive nature) or finding a way to loosen it (creative intelligence) (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 18). The account of episodes such as Bucephalus' funeral and of Alexander's self-control in the desert personalise him to some extent. Alexander is a controversial figure, however, and this text refrains from entirely idealising him, including several things that do not reflect well on him by most moral standards, ancient or modern. Numerous events are softened or avoided to tone down the negative impression that they may create, or prevent the inclusion of material unsuitable for children. So, for example, at the Battle of the Granicus the Persians are said to have run away, with no mention of the killing of large numbers of Greek mercenaries who had surrendered (Plutarch, *Alexander,* 16, with Arrian 16). The account of Alexander's interaction with Indian sages is told entirely to Alexander's advantage. The example given of a sage's wisdom shows no wisdom at all (in an unaccountably hostile retelling of the story of Calanus, for which see Arrian 7.3; Strabo, 15.1.68; Diodorus Siculus 17.107.1) as such, Alexander appears wise in ignoring him; this runs counter to the ancient tradition, in which Alexander is generally impressed with Indian philosophy and positive examples of the sages' insights are given (e.g. Arian, 2-3; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 64-65).

The representation of sexual relations and marriage is told in a manner simplified for children and, arguably, more conservative adult readers or purchasers. Alexander marries Roxanne because he falls in love with her after seeing her beautiful smile, with no reference to her perspective on the situation or to the possibility of strategic considerations. There is no explanation or discussion when Alexander is married for a second time to Darius' daughter, Statiera (who is left unnamed). Alexander's female lovers, such as Barsine, are not mentioned. There are no references to Alexander's same-sex sexual interests. Hephaestion is simply Alexander's "best friend" (p. 6) or



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"closest friend" (p. 60). Bagoas the eunuch does not feature (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 67-7-8; Athenaeus, 13.603b).

Alexander's difficult side is suggested fairly early on. The Greeks are cowed after Thebes by Alexander's "ruthlessness". His friends agree that "Alexander grew more arrogant" after his visit to Siwa. It is Alexander who orders the burning of the palace at Persepolis (typically blamed on a woman in ancient sources, e.g Plutarch, *Alexander*, 38), although he later regrets it. At times the representation of Alexander's bad points even encompasses episodes that the ancient sources depict in a more nuanced light. His attempts to introduce Persian custom are represented as a product of pure arrogance, with no suggestion of a desire to blend cultures or adjust to new circumstances. This section makes effective use of the thought-bubble by having bowing Macedonians secretly thinking that they "feel ridiculous" (p. 39), but there is no attempt to show balance with a Persian point-of-view here. As such this effectively represents the common Macedonian perspective, but does not encourage the child reader to consider the possibility of different opinions. Despite the generally positive representation of Alexander's campaigns, the work finishes on a negative interpretation of his legacy. His empire is depicted as collapsing to nothing after his death, with no reference to the enduring Hellenisation brought by his conquests, nor to the persistence of large empires governed by his surviving generals.

The time-line that concludes enables readers to revisit what they have learned and place it in a clearer chronological framework. The traditional "B.C" is favoured over the more modern B.C.E. There is very little reference to ancient religion in the narrative. Visually, Alexander is depicted as blonde, while most Greeks are depicted as dark-haired (an interesting exception being Olympias, depicted as very blonde). Arms and armour are depicted with reference to ancient images and artefacts, and care is taken to distinguish different ethnicities via clothing and hair-styles, with Greeks, Egyptians, Persians, and Afghans all thus differentiated. Overall this is an exciting read that will familiarise young readers with the main events of Alexander's career and character.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and

Alexander the Great Architecture Egypt Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy



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Concepts

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| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Adolescence Adventure Adversity Character traits Child, children Childhood Conflict Death Desires Diversity Divorce Emotions Expectations Family Friendship Heroism Hierarchy Historical figures History Homesickness Journeys Judgement Loss Love Multiculturalism Murder Philosophy Prediction/prophecy Princes and princesses Race Relationships Religious beliefs Resilience Respect Sacrifice School Science Self Violence War Water |
| Further Reading | Moore, Kenneth, Royce, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great*, Leiden: Brill, 2018. |



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