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Jamila Gavin , David Parkins

Alexander the Great. Man, Myth, or Monster?

United Kingdom (2011)

TAGS: Achilles Agamemnon Alexander the Great Ancient Slavery Architecture Artemis Athens Bible Caesar Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Divination Egypt Egyptian Mythology Gilgamesh Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Heracles Hercules Homer Icarus Iliad Immortality Midas Oracles Patroclus Trojan War Troy Zeus

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Creators

Jamila Gavin , b. 1941
(Author)

Jamila Gavin is an Indian-born author based in Britain best-known for her critically-acclaimed books for young people. She studied at the Trinity College of Music in London before working for the BBC in Arts programming. Her first book, *The Magic Orange Tree*, was published in 1979. Other works include the *Surya Trilogy* (Mammoth, 1997) and *Coram Boy* (Mammoth, 2000), *School for Princes – Stories from the Panchatanta* (Frances Lincoln, 2011), and *Tales from India – Stories of Creation and the Cosmos* (Templar Publishing, 2011). She has published two volumes of autobiography, *Out of India: an Anglo-Indian childhood* (Pavilion, 1997) and *Out of India: Walking on My Hands* (Hodder Children's Books, 2007).

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

David Parkins (Illustrator)

David Parkins is a British illustrator and cartoonist. His topical cartoons have featured in many major publications including *The Economist*, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, and *The Guardian*. His comic-strips have featured in young people's comics such as *The Beano* and *Dandy*. He has illustrated numerous children's books, including history titles such as *Gilgamesh the Hero* (by Geraldine McCaughrean, Oxford University Press, 2002), *Egypt Diary* and *Roman Diary* (by Richard Platt, Walker Books, 2005 and 2009).

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Additional information

Summary

Alexander the Great. Man, Myth, or Monster? introduces young readers to ancient history via biography. The birth to death format follows the traditions of biography, while the narrative also moves forward and backwards in parts, with the narrator recalling previous events or anticipating events that will occur later. The story is punctuated by mythic tales which are introduced as if being told to soldiers in the story. These embedded myths are well chosen to reflect what is happening in the main narrative at the point when they occur, either in theme, moral, or geography. A map of Alexander's empire opens the work and orientates the reader, and this is followed by twenty-two chapters on Alexander's life. There is approximately one large picture per chapter, rendered in black, red, and white in a stylised yet semi-realistic manner.

Chapter One, *The Making of a Hero*, provides an account of Alexander's birth and youth. This includes an account of Alexander's temporary banishment, a detail frequently omitted from children's books (e.g. Bingley's *Alexander the Great*, see entry in this database). The ultimate responsibility for King Philip's murder is left open-ended; several possibilities are put forward, and the reader is free to consider for themselves. The chapter closes with Alexander's succession.

In Chapter Two, *Alexander, the Emperor*, Alexander puts down rebellions to the north and to the south in Thebes. The 6,000 deaths and 30,000 enslavements of the sack of Thebes are referred to, balanced with an account of the "Lady of Timoclea", in which Alexander refrains from executing a woman who murdered the man who raped her.

Chapter Three, *The Conquest Begins* describes the wide variety of people following the army and introduces some of the main Companions of Alexander. Cleitus is introduced first, which establishes his importance and thus increases the impact of his murder later on. Hephaistion is introduced as Alexander's "best friend, the love of his life, Hephaistion. Like Achilles, who had loved Patroclus, Alexander loved Hephaistion." The atmosphere of life on campaign is evoked with reference to battle by day and funerals, dance, music, poetry, and dance by night. There is discussion of the fifth-century Persian Wars, and of an "inherited memory" of shame shared by the Greeks that the Persians were able to burn Athens. The

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story of Achilles' birth and path to war is told, preparing the reader for Alexander's arrival in Troy.

Chapter Four, *Troy*. The army's arrival at Troyis marked with sacrifices and celebrations. Contemporary events are mirrored to the events of the Trojan War. It is asserted (inaccurately) that the Greeks had not at that time won a battle against the Persians in "generations." More of the story of Achilles is told, closing with the warning, "Heroes, remember. Battle brings sorrow and bereavement as well as glory."

Chapter Five, *Persia: On Enemy Soil* opens, "Alexander was now on Persian territory, which had once belonged to Greece." A little of Persian culture is described, notably the figure of Ahura Mazda and the preference for animal and sun iconography. It is explained that some Greeks were anti-Macedonian and therefore fighting against him, with the Persian army comprising a diverse range of ethnicities. The Battle of the Granicus takes place, with General Parmenion urging caution and Alexander dynamically over-ruling. After setting up the battle tactics, the treatment of the battle becomes more immersive and novelistic, notably Alexander's brush with danger and rescue by Cleitus. The Persians request a truce, but "Alexander was in no mood to relax now"; there is some detail on the entrapment of the Greek mercenaries. This is the "true nature" of the "true warrior" Alexander, who hated betrayal; ruthless but not aimless. Detail is provided on the dedications sent to Athens.

Chapter Six, *Lord of All Asia*. This chapter covers the capture of Ephesus, which is accompanied by a retelling of the story of Artemis and Orion, which focuses on Apollo's deception of Artemis. The story of Alexander and the Gordion Knot is told, using the tradition of the knot cut by sword. Alexander becomes ill; Parmenion sends advice to arrest the doctor, which Alexander ignores. Darius orders a massacre at Alexander's field hospital.

In Chapter Seven, *The Battle of Issus* the narrative leads towards Syria, where Persian King Darius' army blocks the way. There is a dramatic account of the Battle of Issus. Darius and Alexander meet eye-to-eye on the battlefield at which point Darius cracks. Alexander is amazed by the king's riches and treats Darius' family courteously, even after they mistake Hephaistion for Alexander.

Chapter Eight, *the Siege of Tyre*. Alexander campaigns to capture

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Tyre after that city's "stubborn and valiant" rejection of Alexander's "diplomatic route." The chapter opens with an account of Heracles' life and information on the Tyrians' ancient temple of Heracles – the reason Alexander is so motivated to capture Tyre. Alexander rejects Parmenion's advice and sends a confident rejection of Darius' offer of truce.

Chapter Nine, *Into Egypt*. Eleven years before Alexander entered Egypt, the Persians invaded and unleashed chaos, attacking the sacred Apis. The tale of Isis and Osiris is told. Alexander takes Egypt with little resistance. He worships the Apis and assumes godhead and divine titles. He founds Alexandria and takes a glass diving bell down to the bottom of the sea. While later people are divided over whether Alexander is a "great leader" or "power-mad genocidal maniac", Alexandria is his "finest legacy."

Chapter Ten, *Crossing the Tigris*. Alexander captures the "heart of Darius' commercial empire."

Chapter Eleven, *Gaugamela*. The reader learns that, "like Agamemnon", Alexander sacrifices a human before the battle. No detail on the sacrifice is offered. Alexander features in a Homeric style arming scene, and his pre-battle speech is given in direct speech which conveys the sense of him taking hold of a disintegrating situation with the force of his charisma. An account of the battle follows, illustrated by a representation of the Pompeii mosaic of the battle. Victory confirms that Alexander is as great a general as Caesar and Napoleon.

Chapter Twelve, *Babylon*. The army capture the "cradle of civilisation." An account of many of the wonders of the city follows accompanied by the biblical story of Belshazzar's Feast.

Chapter Thirteen, *On the Persian Throne*. 300 years after Belshazzar, Alexander is now in Babylon. People have begun mixing his story with the old myths. The story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is told. Hephaistion's (and Alexander's) deaths are anticipated by the observation that Alexander should weep now, for Hephaistion will die as did Enkidu and Patroclus.

Chapter Fourteen, *Persepolis*. The army needs rewarding and Persepolis is said to symbolise generations of Greek hatred of the Persians derived from the Persian burning of Athens, so Alexander lets

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the army free to sack the city. Mutilated Greek slaves approach Alexander; he treats them gently and grants them tax breaks. He is young and impetuous. He burns the palace down after a drunken party. He atones by restoring Cyrus the Great's tomb. He is a god and hero, he is also a beast.

Chapter Fifteen, *The Death of Darius*. Alexander donates his cloak to cover Darius' body. Darius was betrayed; Alexander increasingly worries about being betrayed himself. His army are realising that they are not going home. The Companion, Philotas, is executed, and his father, Parmenion, is executed in his wake. The army are enduring great physical hardships on their campaigns.

Chapter Sixteen, *Samarkand*. The soldiers gather round for the story of Sohrab and Rostam, a story from before the Persian Empire even existed. It is a sad story and the army are sorrowful.

Chapter Seventeen, *In the Footsteps of Dionysus*. Dionysus is discussed as a strange god, a mixture of bliss and savage, male and yet feminine, wild. "It could be a description of Alexander. Almost." Alexander murders Cleitus in a drunken row; he attempts to kill himself. The attempt to introduce *proskynesis* amongst the Macedonians is causing bad feeling, as are the promotions of senior Persians. Alexander's marriage to Roxanne follows, further alienating the Macedonians despite an impressive campaign. Alexander looks east to India.

Chapter Eighteen, *India*. This chapter tells the story of Vishnu and Shiva. It is said that Alexander must have loved the stories of Krishna, so like Achilles. There are further stories from the *Mahabharata*.

Chapter Nineteen, *To the Ends of the Earth*. The political features of the campaigns in India feature in this chapter, with plans developing against King Porus. Alexander is impressed by the Indian philosophers that he meets, the "priestly Brahmin". The army resent the rain and snakes. There is an exciting account of the Battle of Hydaspes, and Alexander decrees that the defeated Porus will be treated "like a king" as he requested. Alexander sulks "as Achilles had done" when he realises bitterly that his army's refusal to go on means that he will not reach the edge of the earth.

Chapter Twenty. *The Journey Back*. This chapter deals with the army's return march through the desert. The massacre that they unleash

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when Alexander is wounded is likened to massacres in the *Mahabharata*.

Chapter Twenty-One. *The Return to Persia*. Now back in Persia, Alexander regrets burning Persepolis. This is the point at which he repairs Cyrus' tomb. The weddings at Susa take place in a bid to unite cultures. Alexander experiences "rage" at the rebellion at Opis, but his charisma prevents total disaster. Hephaistion dies. The narrator speculates that there can be no happiness for Alexander from now on; the king is increasingly extravagant and given to cross-dressing. The myth of Icarus is told.

Chapter Twenty-Two. *Death*. Following a series of omens, Alexander dies. The narrator speculates on possible causes, including poisonings. There is a brief summary of Alexander's achievements, and reference to the "terrible silence" and grief that met his death. Was he blood-thirsty or a genius? A Persian story of Alexander's hand is told, in which the corpse of Alexander will not rest until it grasps one more handful of earth.

The narrative is followed by a passage of Arrian as Epilogue, a chronology of Alexander's career, and an index.

Analysis

Alexander the Great. Man, Myth, or Monster? is an engaging work full of energy as well as detail. Overall it is a very traditional retelling of Alexander's life, although the inclusion of relevant myths is original and adds to the impression of Alexander as a near-mythical hero. The acknowledgements refer to the use of Robin Lane-Fox's *Alexander*, a popular modern biography, and to Arrian's *Campaigns of Alexander*, a major ancient source for his life Many anecdotes from Arrian and from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* are used to illustrate the same or similar moral/personality traits that the ancient authors attached to them. Moreover, the work reflects the tradition of Alexander historiography in placing the focus of the story on Alexander's own character and the perceived effects upon his character of power and opportunity. Arrian's use of Parmenion as a conservative foil to Alexander's dynamism is repeated here, with several famous exchanges paraphrased. This use of ancient material enables young people to become familiar with aspects of the ancient tradition at an early stage in their learning while replicating the idea of history (particularly Alexander's history) as moral lesson.

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The very title of the book alerts the reader to the intention to evaluate Alexander morally. That said, he is presented positively and without explicit evaluation until the remark in chapter 9 that Alexander's legacy is split between those who think him a "great leader" and those that think him a "power-mad genocidal maniac". As there has been little sign of the "power-mad genocidal maniac", the sudden appearance of this allegation is striking. Positivity towards Alexander comes in the practice – itself a replication of ancient historiography – of balancing his violence with distracting exonerating details. So it is that the horrors of the sack of Thebes are balanced by clemency towards the lady of Timoclea (Plutarch, *Alexander,* 12) (not, as is more usual, on the sparing of Pindar's house or descendants); the killing of the Greek mercenaries (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 16, with Arrian 16) is described in a somewhat confused passage which is followed by remarks on Alexander's hatred of treachery (with the implication that the mercenaries deserved to die because they had betrayed Alexander); the people of Tyre are "stubborn" for rejecting diplomacy; Alexander sacks and burns Persepolis, but he regrets it and he is kind to the Greeks that he finds enslaved there. Alexander is described in a whirl of energetic descriptions. He is eager, brave, impetuous, creative, problem-solving, ingenious, physically "magnificent" in battle. He uses the skills of others well, he can "think quickly," his brain is "never still". Following the ancient tradition, the negative anecdotes accumulate more rapidly as time goes on, although many of these are also coupled with redeeming qualifiers. The Sogdian Rock is captured following "ignoble acts combined with acts of mythic heroism." Much like Arrian and Plutarch's Alexander, this Alexander is impressive if disturbing, an inspiration and a warning.

The inclusion of embedded story-telling within the main text is an unusual feature in a life of Alexander and it is handled extremely effectively. Much as anecdote is used to illustrate moral points about Alexander's nature, so these myths reflect the situations that Alexander, his army, or his antagonists find themselves in. Thus the story of Gilgamesh is both geographically relevant for Babylon, and treated explicitly as a reflection on the fates of Alexander and Hephaistion; the myth of Isis and Osiris is both appropriate for Egypt and an expression of Alexander bringing order to chaos in contrast to the Persian re-conquest of Egypt; the sad tale of Sohrab and Rostam is geographically apt and carries the sub-text of an endless struggle to control the Iranian plains; the myth of Icarus anticipates Alexander's fall from what is implied to be too great a height, and so on. These

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myths enrich the main text and also demonstrate sensitivity to the broad ethnic difference within the territory conquered by Alexander, communicating to the young reader both the extraordinary experience of campaigners who traversed so wide a terrain and the value of the traditions of each community encountered. Much is made of the comparison of Achilles and Alexander, a trope which Alexander himself encouraged. Young readers may not recognise the full implications of these embedded myths, but they may effect some of their apparently intended aims all the same, enriching the reader's sense of the diversity and history of the different regions, communicating the importance of storytelling in ancient cultures, and bestowing upon Alexander's life a similar semi-mythical quality.

The treatment of religion gets off to a somewhat strange start. It is asserted in the first few pages that Alexander "thought a lot about God", and that he was in a "state of grace" during battle. These apparently Christianising themes do not recur, however, and the treatment of religion becomes a marker of period (lots of references to omens and sacrifices) and, as in ancient literature, a marker of Alexander's moral character. Thus Alexander worships Apis where Artaxerxes Ochus killed Apis; Alexander comes to think of himself as a god, and Darius does too; Alexander respects the philosophers in India demonstrating that he is philosophically-minded too; he begins to ignore omens and his death follows soon behind. The treatment of death is bold and direct by the standards of writings for young people. That death and bereavement are an inevitable part of life is a theme revisited throughout the work, treated in a heroic vein that urges a meaningful life and an awareness of mortality and the passing of ages. Hephaistion's death is anticipated early on.

The relationship between Alexander and Hephaistion is referred to as "love" and friendship, terms vague enough to mean what they will to the individual reader (Bagoas does not feature in the work. For him see Plutarch, *Alexander*, 67-7-8; Athenaeus, 13.603b). The linking of their relationship with those of Achilles and Patroclus and Gilgamesh and Enkidu reflects earlier traditions and continues the heroic styling of Alexander's life. While Alexander is made mythic, some mythical events are somewhat historicised. The Trojan War is represented as a historical engagement. Historical events preceding Alexander’s campaign are sometimes somewhat misrepresented. Troy was not Greek territory in a meaningful way; it is not accurate to say that Greeks had not won any victories over the Persians in many generations (Agesilaus II of Sparta won victories, for example); and

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there is over-emphasis on the idea that all Greeks resented the Persians as a consequence of the sack of Athens. These tropes seem to feature in order to normalise if not justify the attack on the Persian Empire, and to thereby justify, perhaps, the interest in a "genocidal maniac". While they are exaggerated, however, these tropes do nonetheless reflect a genuine if complex antagonism between Persia and the Greeks, a background which many young readers may be unfamiliar with. As such, this is a useful if exaggerated form of context. Overall this is an exciting and thought-provoking treatment of the subject. If it is favourable to Alexander, it is not uncritical and invites young people to consider the suffering as well as the glamour that his reign represents.

This is an unusually long book for readers of this age-group, which may make the experience of reading it very immersive and which certainly bestows a great deal of material to consider. The narrative conveys an appreciation of very active virtues, such as physical bravery and prowess, leadership and charisma. It also makes a virtue of self-control and mercy. Arrogance, paranoia, and unrestrained violence are indicated to be personal flaws. The treatment of empire is more ambiguous; it is represented as impressive to conquer, yet the desirability of conquest is made less certain. Ultimately the book invites young readers to make moral evaluations of historical figures while making it apparent that one can admire a figure without admiring everything about them.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Agamemnon Alexander the Great Ancient Slavery Architecture Artemis Athens Bible Caesar Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Divination Egypt Egyptian Mythology Gilgamesh Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Heracles Hercules Homer Icarus Iliad Immortality Midas Oracles Patroclus Trojan War Troy Zeus
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

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Further Reading

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