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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Axios

Dolores A. McCabe
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Perhaps it's because their names seem similar but Claudia Acte the fetching character at the core of Dolores A. McCabe's *Axios* recalls Cleopatra the ancient world's preeminent vamp. Nero's onetime mistress may be a mere historical footnote but McCabe's swiftly paced novel makes you wish you could have known her—so much as anyone can fathom an enigma.

Axios as a title is equally alluring. In her preface McCabe says it means "the applause of Ancient Greeks for theatrical performances well done"; it's also a kind of acclamation in the Orthodox Church upon the ordination of bishops priests and deacons the name of a Greek river and a phrase usually translated as "he is worthy." Maybe one can take an imaginative leap and suppose the last definition not the first fits best. After all Claudia Acte was a *hetaera*—a Greek woman procured as a companion for highborn men—who through happenstance and cunning became a freedwoman in Ancient Rome. As McCabe imagines it Claudia Acte living at the very apogee of Roman power and influence also converts to Christianity during one of several failed attempts to escape her enslavement.

Not all of the novel's characters seem so human. True it's something of a thankless task to write dialogue for Nero; certainly McCabe captures his narcissism and petulance with lip-thrusting verve. Her overuse of exclamation points however reduces this Caesar to a salad of caricature. By contrast McCabe's plan for Ofonius Tigellinus the rising star of Nero's court a man so bewitched by Claudia Acte that he'll do anything to stop her from fleeing his clutches is to portray him as a superb political comer—part Machiavelli part Iago part Karl Rove.

The greatest joy in *Axios* is found in the way Claudia Acte comes to peace with her sad circumstances—how by placing her faith in Jesus Christ she stops fighting the system that subordinates her and instead patiently bears witness to it willing herself as a martyr to Rome's crassest elements secure that her redeemer cherishes her and has reserved a better site for soul no matter her ills in the present. Indeed all kinds of ills surround her as Nero's rule crumbles as Tigellinus' power soars and falls as the great fire of Rome reduces the citadel of the ancient world into a metaphor for the empire's ruin. In the end there's a Joan of Arc-like quality a Job-like quality to Claudia Acte something made all the more excruciating—and therefore thrilling—because it was her beauty that sealed her fate. Fact or fiction few have ever faced down the ugliness of man with such grace.
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