

Captivity

György Spiró

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Captivity is an exciting and engrossing historical epic that richly rewards the reader.

Clocking in at over eight hundred pages, *Captivity* is a sprawling, epic bildungsroman that immerses the reader in a richly detailed world of the past. In the waning days of the emperor Tiberius, with the Eastern Mediterranean world in flux, a callow young man grows and matures, learning to see both what is before his eyes and what he can infer through deduction and experience.

Uri, a young man in Rome's impoverished community of Jewish expatriates, is surprised and shocked to be named as one of the delegates assigned to carry the community's annual temple offering to Jerusalem. As part of this delegation, he is expelled from the familiar Rome of his childhood and cast into a churning cauldron of competing, jostling cultures.

Other authors have explored this time and place, of course, but unlike many of them, Spiro does not focus on the ministry and crucifixion of a certain Galilean carpenter or the machinations of the Imperial court. Uri is from first to last a man of his time, place, and culture: a Roman Jew, an outsider everywhere. His travels bring him in contact with individuals whose names appear in Christian scriptures, but his view of them is frequently very different from their portrayal in the New Testament. His journey takes him from dangerously political Rome to religion-wracked Judea and cosmopolitan Alexandria, where the intellectual storehouse of the great library coexists uneasily with epicurean delights, hedonistic abandon, sharp business dealing, and the ever-present threats of political manipulation, personal deceit, and ethnic quarreling.

Opening the book is like stepping into a fabulous bazaar in a strange land, where every turn might lead to an unfamiliar pleasure or a deadly ambush. Uri's story is both intensely personal and deeply universal. His delights and disappointments are aching, universally human. At the same time, his experiences foreshadow the wrenching changes that the Jewish culture itself will experience in the catastrophic diaspora of the coming years.

Captivity is an exciting and engrossing epic that richly rewards the reader. Winner of the Aegon literary award in Hungary, it deserves equal success in the English-speaking world.

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