ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Cutter's Island: Caesar in Captivity
Vincent Panella
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A two-sentence biographical aside in Suetonius—how Julius Caesar, age twenty-five, en route to Rhodes, was abducted by pirates, ransomed and released, then revenged when, still as a private citizen, he confiscated his captors' bounty and had them crucified—has found a most thoughtful amanuensis in this spare, evocative fiction, a meditation on the casualties of politics and revenge.

Like a bit of sea glass washed up on shore of that nameless Mediterranean island, Panella has fashioned a polished prism that refracts its Roman sun, both Caesar's sensual past and his ambitious public future. More novella than first novel, written by a veteran journalist, professor and memoirist, Cutter's Island hews to a classic agon between matched rivals. They play a peculiar game of chess. A political novice mocks his barbarian audience with his own poetry recitations, this is Caesar; a one-armed ex-gladiator hectors his noble captive with tales of the Greco-Roman outposts, this is Cutter. And for forty nights on his island jail, Caesar writes, remembers and dreams.

If there is a distracting note in the work, it is in its staccato exchanges between Cutter and the haughty Caesar. Granted, their vernacular Latin is transposed into the vulgate of a somewhat stilted American English, but the strain of preserving some flavor of Caesar's clipped speech (his famous prose style) gives a terseness the page cannot do justice to. Caesar begins to sound like Clint Eastwood in his "spaghetti Western" Italian period. But let Cutter tell of being impressed into a Roman gladiator school, for example, with its motto of "no mercy," and suddenly the Coliseum's stench and gory drama are vividly alive. Equally, Caesar's conquest has a terrible beauty to it, almost a courtesy to his enemy, his first taste of retribution: "The crosses are still discernible, like children's play sticks in the sand. Cutter is forward of the rest, ready to receive the pack of vultures who settle on the sand and stride toward him like generals. I shudder to think what language might pass between them."

Cicero's advice, to love your friend as though he would one day become your enemy, went to Caesar's deaf ear. His assassin Brutus makes a telling cameo here, a mere boy whose

mother is Caesar's bewitching lover. This marrying of fact to fiction has ample precedent. Like David Malouf's novel Imaginary Life of the Roman poet Ovid bemoaning his political exile on a forsaken island, Cutter's Island shares a singular need to make history speak to us in urgency and poignancy.

Leeta Taylor