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Clarion Review ★★★★½ HISTORICAL

The Death of Carthage

Robin E. Levin
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“Your cousin may seem completely harmless to you, Ectorius, but I can assure you that after sixteen years in the Roman cavalry, serving during the entire second Punic war, he is supremely adept at homicide!”

So says the historical figure Senator Marcus Porcius Cato of Lucius Tullius Varro, the fictional hero of the first of three interrelated stories that make up Robin Levin’s *The Death of Carthage*. Levin’s book is much like the Lucius Tullius Varro character of whom the famous senator speaks: at first it seems to be just another by-the-numbers Roman historical novel, but the harder the reader looks, the deeper the narrative becomes.

The first part of the book is the conventional Roman soldier’s war story told in first person, but with two twists. First, Lucius is a cavalryman instead of the usual legionary foot soldier. Second, there are so many direct and lengthy quotes from the Roman historian Titus Livius that Levin should credit him as coauthor.

Famous senators and generals pontificate in soliloquies lifted directly from Livius’s classic history, *Ab Urbe Condita*. Levin shuffles these monologues into part one as if inserting index cards of quotes into a term paper. The twenty-two pieces from Livius—some several pages long—make up a sizable chunk of the first story. The author does give Livius his due by including citations, but the changes in voice from Levin to Livius are jarring.

That said, the first section is a decent battle story. The action follows Lucius as he fights in the secondary theater (Hispania) in the war against Carthage. Levin spares Lucius the trials and tribulations of Rome’s humiliating defeats by Hannibal, yet the young soldier suffers enough at the hands of the great general’s brothers.

The second story is much more engaging. Entitled “Captivus,” it is the story of Lucius’s cousin, Enneus, also a cavalryman, who is captured in battle and sold into slavery. If Lucius tells a tale of war, Enneus tells a tale of survival. Again, it is a first-person narrative, so the reader knows that just as Lucius will make it through the war, Enneus will endure his captivity. This is the shortest of the three stories, and it sets up the third and best of the trio: “Hector’s Odyssey.”

Levin’s writing matures as the novel progresses. In the third story, citations from Livius (and now Polybius) become shorter and less frequent, and even the famous characters (among them Cato) more often speak words given to them by Levin rather than Livius. Hector, the son of Enneus, born during his twenty-one-year-long captivity, is neither soldier nor slave but a translator. His linguistic and scriptural talents bring him into the inner circles of power in Rome—and earn him a box seat to the final act for which the novel is named: the absolute destruction of Carthage in the third and final Punic war.

This last story is easily the most vivid of the three narratives that make up *The Death of Carthage*. Hector, because of his origin, is not the typical Roman. He abhors slavery in an empire being built with captive labor. That puts him both at odds with, and in the position of being able to comment on, a society in flux. Levin has the young Hector meet the aging Lucius, bringing the story full circle and tying it all up quite nicely. It is this final third of the book that makes it an

original and meaningful take on the standard Roman war novel.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (June 29, 2012)

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