

The Helvetian Affair: De Re Helvetiana

Ray Gleason

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Roman history is a bloody saga of invasion, conquest, and empire building. Ray Gleason's new historical novel, *The Helvetian Affair*, is the second book in a hard-hitting, gritty series that explores Ancient Rome from a soldier's perspective. Through the diary of soldier Gaius Marius Insubrecus, the past is brought to life in vivid and unsparing detail.

"Only politicians, historians, and generals classify battles as victories or defeats," says Gaius's journal. "Soldiers recognize no victories." From the first page, *The Helvetian Affair* get straight to the point. Gaius Marius, 16 years old and as green as a leaf of grass, joins the Roman army just in time to take part in a major campaign. Led by the famed general Julius Caesar—who will go on to command the Roman Empire—the army is a hodgepodge of engaging characters. Gleason provides a helpful list of *dramatis personae*, since the nicknames fly fast and thick.

Gaius, also called The Hick, Gai, Little Bear, and a handful of other, less polite names, is thrown into the midst of the conflict in Gaul, part of modern-day France. Gleason blends the past with contemporary details, seamlessly incorporating familiar tropes of military life with Roman history. "I was allowed to keep my own belt, pugio, and sagum cloak because they 'adhered to military specifications,' but I was warned that I would have to get the sagum dyed the appropriate shade of *carinus*, the dark, reddish-brown, that was authorized for the Tenth Legion," Gaius says. Since he's healthy (and not flat-footed), Gai makes it through basic training and marches into the Alps with the rest of his unit.

Gleason weaves an excellent, suspenseful tale. Gaius is the perfect narrator: in the right place at the right time. The army's journey into Gaul and its strategic stops along the way are so clearly detailed that Gleason doesn't need to include a map. Times, dates, and details are provided in English, Gallic, and Latin—the frequent italics are initially distracting, but Gleason stays consistent and natural, alternating the various languages as needed.

The Helvetian Affair is a fast-paced military history that adds depth and detail to the frequently traveled terrain of Roman conquest. Intrigue, betrayal, and emotion combine in this heady story of war in ancient times.

CLAIRE FOSTER (Summer 2016)

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