

The Queen's Dog: An Empire at Twilight Novel

N. L. Holmes

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Third in a series set in ancient Syria, The Queen's Dog is a historical novel about political intrigue, infidelity, and revenge.

A slave's moment of anger alters both his fate and the future of a kingdom in N. L. Holmes's historical novel *The Queen's Dog*.

Naheshi thinks the world of Taddu, queen of Ugarit, whom he has served as a chamberlain for years. But not everyone is so enraptured by Taddu's girlish innocence: Ahat-milki, her hated mother-in-law, believes the queen is part of a plan to overthrow Taddu's husband, and she forces Naheshi to spy on his beloved mistress. As he is dragged deeper into the web of royal intrigue and infighting, Naheshi decides where his loyalties lie, and who he really has responsibilities to.

The book is set during the tumultuous, waning days of the kingdom of Hatti. Ugarit is a small but important vassal of Hatti and, by 1230 BCE, is torn between honoring the Hittite treaty or defecting to the more powerful kingdom of Assyria. It is this political turmoil that engulfs Naheshi and everyone around him. Maps illustrate the setting, while extensive notes delineate which parts of the narrative are true and which are imagined. This blend of fact and fiction is as compelling as it is educational.

The book reveals details of the harsh lives that eunuchs like Naheshi endured in ancient Syria: though revered for their musical talents, they are scorned and looked down on, regarded as unattractive, unmanly, and less than human. Naheshi has internalized these attitudes and castigates himself for every perceived failure, even as he excuses Taddu's frequent thoughtlessness. He endures terrible abuse of all kinds at the hands of others, but remains forgiving and gentle. This sets him apart in a world of hardhearted royals and unmotivated servants. Ahat-milki is his exact opposite: strong and merciless, she never allows her personal feelings to interfere with her unpleasant duties. Her devotion to duty outweighs her maternal affection with devastating consequences for both herself and Naheshi. The contrast between their viewpoints increases the story's tension and highlights the brutality of the ancient world.

Naheshi's moment of truth is energizing but short-lived. The intense emotion in this and other moments comes through in poignant descriptions of his rage, his memories, and even the way he hovers and putters to cover his stress. Horrified by the consequences of his brief anger, Naheshi soon reverts to old thought patterns. Even as their world grows ever more unrecognizable, no one can escape their ingrained roles: Naheshi must serve his queen, and Ahat-milki must serve her country, no matter the personal cost or larger consequences.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (June 6, 2021)

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