



Catullus' Bedspread: The Life of Rome's Most Erotic Poet

Daisy Dunn , Catullus (Contributor)

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A vivid narrative that recreates the life of Gaius Valerius Catullus, Rome's first modern" poet, and follows a young man's journey through a world filled with all the indulgences and sexual excesses of the time, from doomed love affairs to shrewd political maneuvering and backstabbing—an accessible, appealing look at one of history's greatest poets.

Born to one of Verona's leading families, Catullus spent most of his young adulthood in Rome, mingling with the likes of Caesar and Cicero and chronicling his life through his poetry. Famed for his lyrical and subversive voice, his poems about his friends were jocular, often obscenely funny, while those who crossed him found themselves skewered in raunchy verse, sudden objects of hilarity and ridicule. These bawdy poems were disseminated widely throughout Rome. Many of his poems recall his secret longstanding affair with the seductive Clodia, an older woman who would eventually be plunged into scandal following the suspicious death of her aristocratic husband.

While Catullus and Clodia made love in the shadows, the whole of Italy was quaking as Caesar, Pompey and Crassus forged a doomed alliance for power. During these tumultuous years, Catullus increasingly turned to darker subject matter, and he finally composed his greatest work of all—a poem about the decoration on a bedspread—which forms the heart of this biography, a work of beauty that will achieve immortality and make Catullus a legend.

Catullus' Bedspread: The Life of Rome's Most Erotic Poet Details

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Harriet says

I loved this book. It inspired so much thought in so many ways and areas and I can honestly say I had never thought this much about one person until this book!

Jane says

Unlike any other biography I've read of anyone; quite fascinating how the author cleverly reconstructed Catullus's life mainly from his own poetry and other primary sources. Though scatological and even obscene at times, he was a poet of great feeling, introspection, and intensity. Some of his incisive poems on particular personalities presage Martial or Juvenal. The author used as point of reference #64 -- what she considers his masterpiece, the *miniature epic* she termed the "Bedspread poem", of extended mythological scenes and Catullus's Five Ages of Mankind -- which led her to relate his other poems to his life: from growing up in Verona, to Rome, to Bithynia on the Black Sea, thence back to Rome and his home on Lake Garda. The "Lesbia" poems trace his love affair with Clodia Metelli, from fevered beginning through love/hate to its end, where he tells two fellow poets [and us]:

"And may she not expect my love as before,/Which through her fault has fallen like a flower/On the edge of a meadow, touched/By a plough passing by." From Poem #11.

We enter into Catullus's world, also the political conditions, machinations, and upheaval of the Late Republic. Ms. Dunn has also provided interesting analyses of some of the poems -- what she thinks are subtle meanings between the lines. She does fill in gaps in setting the scenes with her own words: for instance, when Catullus first climbs the Palatine to the Metellus home, his voyage home from Bithynia and last, where we see him on the shore of Lake Garda. He watches the water "lick the land like tears."

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/pai...>

Based on the myth of Ariadne and Bacchus from the "Bedspread poem", the Titian painting commissioned by the Italian Renaissance duke Alfonso III, d'Este, of Ferrara.

Highly recommended.

Colin says

I got this book from the library, but it is now on my Amazon wishlist because I definitely want to own this. A biography of the poet of the late Republic, Gaius Valerius Catullus, which attempts to take a measured view integrating all that is known or surmised about him, including some of the subtler references in his own poetry. It is entirely too easy to dismiss Catullus as a smutty writer, a purveyor of poetic filth, if one does not understand the unparalleled deftness and elegance with which he wrote, or the more serious nature of some of his work. His father's political connections to Julius Caesar, his more personal connections with Cicero and Clodia Metelli . . . fascinating stuff. The serious Catullus scholar is likely to find that most of this covers familiar ground, but there are bound to be a few revelations!

Hannah says

3.5 Stars - Really good, almost great, book

Daisy Dunn details, as best as she can, the life of Roman poet Catullus.

Ancient Rome fascinates me and I appreciate this book is about an aspect that, historically, is overlooked — poets and their poetry. Usually, at least in my experience, there's a lot of work on military, politics, and important players in those fields. Of course that's not to say that those traditional elements don't play a part in Catullus' story because they do. However, this book is parsed with Catullus poetry and the author does a good job of balancing fact, poetry, and analysis.

Do I recommend this one? Yes. Overall it's a different view of Ancient Rome and I liked it.

Charlie says

A wonderful journey into the world of one of Rome's best, enduring, and at one time controversial poets. A story of the end of the Roman Republic cleverly interwoven with his poems. Daisy Dunn has linked Catullus' poems so well with the issues of that day, and explained the double meanings we miss out on reading the poems in translation so well, that this book deserves to go to the top of any person who wishes to find out more about Roman poetry.

Vicki Cline says

The author reconstructs Catullus' life from his poems and contemporaneous historical accounts. Besides his poetry, Catullus is most famous for his affair with Clodia, the sister of the demagogue Publius Clodius Pulcher and the wife of former consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer. Many of his poems are quite scatological, and others are outright attacks on people, including Caesar. It's a very interesting look at Rome during the last years of the Republic.

Carey Combe says

Considering so little is known about this scurrilously wickedly good poet she has created an imaginative, accessible portrait of him. Wonderful.

Susan says

Subtitled, "The Life of Rome's Most Erotic Poet," this is the biography of Gaius Valerius Catullus, believed to be born in Verona about 82 B.C. One of the problems with trying to write the biography of someone who lived so long ago is obviously the lack of material to work with. However, in this case, we are lucky. For

Catullus was Rome's first lyric poet and his poetry, unlike most of his contemporaries, dealt less with epic adventures, and more with the personal.

Catullus lived in turbulent times and his world was populated with great men – Julius Caesar (a dinner guest of his father), Pompey the Great, Crassus, Cicero and others. Therefore, his poems also give us a personal portrait of a critical point in world politics, as well as a personal and immediate view of his life and his loves. For Catullus was more bedroom than battlefield and his immediate concerns mostly involved his own personal life. As a poet he inspired Ovid and Virgil among others and, because his poetry deals with his own feelings, disappointments and emotions, they still seem extremely relevant and, almost shockingly modern.

Author, Daisy Dunn, interweaves poetry into this book; using Catullus' own words to tell his story. So here is his story, of a poet from the upper echelons of society. A second son whose elder brother died and who was forced to return to Verona from Rome. A man who fell passionately in love with another man's wife. Above all a man who used his experience to write great poetry. I think he would be pleased that this book existed and that his poetry is still read and remembered. A fascinating read and an amazingly vivid portrait of a man who lived so long ago, in such amazing times.

Tim Atkinson says

Not quite biography, not quite literary criticism or straight translation, this hybrid of a book mixes the genres to make a classical cocktail that really hits the spot.

Anna Nesterovich says

I think the author misjudged her audience. This book is not a "vivid narrative" it claims to be. It is very well researched, interesting, somewhat controversial, but definitely not vivid. Paragraphs feel disjointed from one another. The narrative behaves more like a solid than a liquid, and a living solid at that: it jumps like a cricket from one paragraph to the next, instead of flowing seamlessly as I would expect it. The whole biography resembles a workbook, with a lot of extensive notes. And there is also a decisive lack of original Latin poems. I know, the interested reader is supposed to go out there and find them. But it would be really nice to at least have a few examples, even if only to see first-hand the rhythm the author talks about.

Jon says

Make it three and a half, because some of her translations are quite imaginative and immediate. She even imitates Catullus' "frenetic rhythm" in poem 63, the only one in Latin in this "galliambic" rhythm, meant to remind the reader of the cymbals and drums of wild worshipers of the Great Mother Cybele. But the whole project is a little suspect from the start: almost nothing is known about the poet's life, and what is guessed is drawn (as she does here) from supposedly autobiographical details in his poetry. There's a lot of dispute about that, which she honestly acknowledges (in her footnotes). There are 116 poems, and they are clearly not in chronological order. They do not tell a step-by-step story. 22 of them mention "Lesbia" as the love (and hate) of his life. Other love poems are written to an unnamed woman--is that still Lesbia, or somebody else? How can anyone possibly decide? There are some famous names in his poetry, but are they identical with the people of the same name whom history remembers? There are a lot of mythical allusions--do they

reference then-current political events? Dunn comes down pretty firmly on all these questions. But it seems to me she has conjured up a Catullus who is, like the promises of women in love (as he says), written in the wind and on running water.

Simon Vozick-Levinson says

I loved this wonderfully vivid account of Catullus' life and work -- a *lepidus* blend of literary analysis, biography, and cultural history, with plenty of original insight and *sal* to spare. Catullus' poems have been a personal favorite ever since I studied them in school many years ago, and Dunn captures his surly, sensitive spirit better than any English commentator I can recall.

Justin Redpath says

Not quite historical fiction but the type where the author says things like, "Catullus walked up the Palatine, sweating profusely in the Roman summer" -- things that are plausibly true but ultimately unprovable. However, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this. Dunn brought together a wealth of resources to provide an invaluable overall CONTEXT not only for the life of Catullus but also for his poems. Now I finally know who each person is (was), what was going on in Roman politics and social life, etc., to explain each poem. It makes me want to set this as required reading for my high school students when we get to the unit on Catullus.

Michael Arnold says

Wow is the subtitle ill-advised and stupid.

This is quite a good book, and quite an interesting take on it all - but I can already see that it is better to think of this book as a novel than as a biography of a poet we basically don't know anything about. As a novel, this is actually (being honest) extremely well written and well worth reading.

I'm not sure I agree with many of Dunn's opinions on Catullus's relationships, and her timeline, but I suppose that isn't the point. This book is, though, very well written, and very well researched - even if it assumes Dunn's opinions as fact, there is absolutely no evidence Catullus died at age 30 in Rome. He simply disappears from the record, anything could have happened to him, his death is just the safest bet. However, she is a lecturer in Classics, so her opinions and guesses are obviously informed enough to carry some weight.

This is worth reading, and it's even a lot of fun. But I do not think it should be taken as bible paper or anything.

Mike says

This was a fun biography of Catullus (using, mostly, his own poems, which is of course Fraught) for a general audience. I'm impressed by the dogged attempt to put everything into a chronology, which is great

for a history, but doesn't work for a poetry book -- and so it makes a lot of sense that this is NOT a poetry book. Dunn has apparently also done a translation (except for excerpts, 64 is the only poem completely translated in this book), which is definitely something I'd like to get my hands on.

For those who haven't read Catullus, and simplifying a bit, we have a vaguely-metrically-arranged book of Catullus' poems that was likely not Catullus' original arrangement of the book (or books), and would probably not have been chronological in the first place. You pretty much have to read the whole thing to absorb the interconnectedness of it all. Because Catullus mentions a lot of contemporaries, it's very tempting to mine his book for biographical details and make connections to historical events, but that only goes so far before you start having to make educated guesses. My one complaint with *Catullus' Bedspread* is that Dunn often doesn't make it clear what's a guess (or the thought process behind that guess). Not doing this makes it a lot more readable, of course, so it's hard to argue too much, but there were points where I would have liked a footnote (this book used endnotes, which is a perfectly sensible choice that I always absolutely hate).
