



Cicero Orator and Statesman

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Robert Harris' fictional trilogy provides an incisive portrait of one of history's literary giants—Marcus Tullius Cicero—and the turbulent times in which he lived, writes Stephanie Forrest.

In a note at the beginning of his latest novel, *Dictator*, Robert Harris describes the last decades of the Roman Republic as 'arguably—at least until the convulsions of 1933-45—the most tumultuous era in human history.' Clearly this is an overstatement. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that there are few episodes in history that have inspired, fascinated, or been as influential in shaping Western thought as the twilight years of the Roman Republic.

Why do the events of these years continue to fascinate us now, more than two thousand years later? Perhaps it is because of the parallels that have long been drawn between the Roman 'Republic'—the complex, mixed system of government that prevailed before the rise of Julius Caesar and Augustus—and the modern West. Though we should not overstate these parallels, it was nevertheless a society with a firm unwritten constitution in which the law was sovereign, and checks and balances prevented any single man from holding absolute power. Over the course of



the first century BC, however, just as it extended its reach across the Mediterranean, the Roman *res publica* descended into crisis and underwent a change of regime. Out of the chaos emerged what was essentially a Roman 'monarchy'. It is easy to see why these events are of interest today.

Or perhaps the Roman Republic appeals to us simply because we know so much about it. The intricacies and intrigues of the period, the soaring ideas and principles, and the quirks of its 'great men' are illuminated in sources that can still be read today. One of the people most responsible for this is the protagonist of Robert Harris' trilogy: the orator and statesman, Marcus Tullius Cicero.

Cicero is an important name in Roman history. He enjoyed fame even in his lifetime, thanks to his success as an orator and his election to the consulship, ordinarily the highest political office in the Republic, in 64 BC. Yet it is not so much to his career that Cicero owes his long-lasting fame; for all his achievements in that arena, he was ultimately eclipsed by giants like Caesar, Pompey, and Octavian.

Rather, Cicero's most important legacy is his writings. Not only do many of his orations and philosophical works survive, which strongly influenced Western philosophy long after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, but we also have hundreds of his private letters addressed to his friends, family, and political connections, which sometimes give us an almost day-to-day account of the events at the end of the Republic. These letters give us a glimpse at Cicero as a real person—flaws intact—more than two thousand years after he died.

Unsurprisingly, Robert Harris isn't the first to pen Cicero into a novel. Anyone who has read Colleen McCullough's *Masters of Rome* series will remember him as that irritating, precocious child who appears in the second volume, and is later derided as a 'timid idiot'. He also features, rather more sympathetically, in the *Roma Sub Rosa* murder mystery series by Stephen Saylor, in Taylor Caldwell's anachronistic 1965 novel *A Pillar of Iron*, and less prominently in the HBO series *Rome*.

Yet surely no author thus far has written a fictional account of Cicero's life as incisively as Robert Harris.

Dictator is Harris' third and long-awaited instalment of a trilogy that recounts the life and career of Cicero, beginning with his early career as a lawyer in the early 70s BC, and concluding with his death in 43 BC.

The three novels are narrated by Tiro, Cicero's slave (later a freedman) and confidential secretary. Tiro certainly was a real person, and he certainly did write a history, which was cited by Plutarch in his *Life of Cicero*. Tiro's account, unfortunately, has not survived, and Harris, following the tradition started by Robert Graves in I, *Claudius*, presents these novels as the lost source.

CICERO IS FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SACRIFICING HIS OWN BELIEFS OR ENDANGERING HIMSELF BY ESPOUSING THEM

The first novel of the trilogy, *Imperium*, traces Cicero's early career, as he overcomes his own

physical infirmities to be elected to the consulship in 64 BC.

The second, *Lustrum*, depicts the events of Cicero's consulship of 63 BC, in which the ruthless demagogue Catiline attempts to overthrow the Republic, and the Senate resorts to extreme measures to remove the threat. It concludes three years later, when one of Cicero's rivals—Clodius Pulcher—harnesses the support of the urban mob and accuses Cicero of executing Catiline's fellowconspirators without trial, forcing him to flee from Rome.

Dictator, is an account of the last fifteen years of Cicero's life. It opens with Cicero in the same sorry state that we left him in at the end of *Lustrum*—fleeing into exile in despair and disgrace, while in Rome, his house is burned down by Clodius' supporters. Cicero spends the first half of the novel in political obscurity, first as an exile and then as an irrelevance back in Rome. In the meantime, affairs decline towards civil war. It is only after Caesar's victory in the civil war—and then after his assassination—that the aging Cicero finally makes a return to power, as he attempts to rally the Senate and use Caesar's appointed heir, Octavian, against Mark Antony. Of course, this turns out to be Cicero's swansong; only a year after Caesar's death, he is betrayed by Octavian, proscribed as an outlaw, and killed.

These novels are an impressive achievement. Since so much is known about Cicero, anyone attempting to write a fictional account of his life would need to do extensive research to pull it off. In this, Harris has certainly succeeded.

He has clearly scoured through Cicero's extensive writings to build a convincing picture of his personality, behaviour, and his way of life. Tiro's narration captures both Cicero's best aspects—clever, witty, compassionate, philosophical, and principled; and his worst—vain, indecisive, terrified of human mortality, and unable to resist a joke even when it comes at a cost.

Nor is Cicero the only character worth noticing. Also of note is his loyal, ever-suffering confidential secretary, the narrator Tiro, who is finally freed from slavery about halfway through the novel. Harris's depiction of a sinister Caesar isn't quite as convincing, and is a striking contrast to Colleen McCullough's glowing depiction of Caesar in her *Masters of Rome* series.

Nevertheless, Pompey is a convincing character, as is Cicero's beloved and tragic daughter, Tullia, the fanatical Cato the Younger, and the ambitious and calculating young Octavian.

Moreover, Harris does well to capture the politics of the era, which bears some striking similarities to the modern era, in the way that popular opinion is manipulated and Cicero is forced to choose between sacrificing his own beliefs for his own safety or endangering himself by espousing them.

We can only read on in dismay as he abandons his principles for political gain—such as when he seeks Pompey and Caesar's support for his return from exile, or when he abandons the senatorial faction after Pompey's defeat at the battle of Pharsalus in hope of being pardoned by Caesar.

The dialogue occasionally feels a little too contemporary, but for the most part is convincing enough. In fact, the novel is speckled with extracts from Cicero's letters and speeches, and other

pieces of speech attributed to him. Indeed, in chapter 5, Cicero is shown speaking in a legal trial and relentlessly mocking Clodia, the promiscuous and cruel sister of his enemy Clodius Pulcher. Most of Cicero's jibes were taken directly out of his actual *Pro Caelio* oration:

...the animosity between me and this woman's husband – excuse me, brother, I always make that mistake.

Most of the criticisms here relate to the style, rather than the historical content. Like most of Harris' novels, *Dictator* is essentially a political thriller. The prose is extremely fast-paced, which is a good thing; yet there is very little atmosphere building or descriptive material, which could have helped to further anchor the audience in the time and place.

In general, the book consists mainly of fast-paced narration, which is broken up here and there with lines of dialogue. Seldom does the narration pause to give readers time to dwell in longer and more detailed scenes. Even important turning points in the novel—like the assassination of Caesar, and Cicero's murder—felt rushed. This is not to say that this is a serious flaw, of course, since style in fiction is very much a matter of personal taste.

Overall, however, Robert Harris' *Dictator*, like the rest of the Cicero trilogy, is an outstanding achievement. It provides a fast-paced, largely historical, and thoroughly human account of the career of one of history's literary giants and the turbulent times in which he lived—a time in which the Roman Republic descended into anarchy, and the rule of law gave way to the rule of man.