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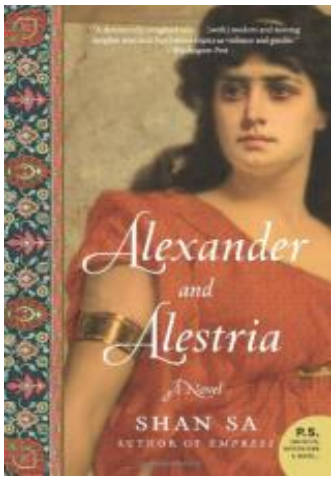
Alexander and Alestria

by Shan Sa



About the Book

Abused by his father, King Philip, who loved and hated his beauty; shadowed by his mother, the mystical and overbearing Queen Olympias; educated by Aristotle who wanted him to be a wise philosopher of Macedonia, Alexander develops a complex character. He becomes a brutal warrior, a pitiless strategist, and a poet longing for the world?s wonders. Meanwhile, in the remote steppes of Siberia, an abandoned girl grows up among the wild mares, then adopted by the queen of the Amazons?the tribe of female warriors who dominates a wild world of snow and volcano. As a future queen, the young girl is trained to hate men and to fight against all invaders.

In the course of his great conquest of Asia, Alexander first meets the stunning Alestria on the battlefield. Surprised to find that his adversary is a woman, he is instantly smitten by the fierce queen. Dazzled by his strength, she decides to kidnap him and make him her "wife." At last, this legendary king --- renowned for his beauty and love of men --- has found his equal. And at last, this indomitable young woman has found a reason to leave her tribe. Their love, deeply passionate and problematic, evolves against an exotic backdrop of warfare and political turmoil, sweeps from antique Greece to Egypt, across the ancient Iraq and Iran, unto the mysterious kingdoms of India.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the meaning of fire in ancient civilizations, both Western and Eastern. In the novel, "fire" is a celebration of life, a secret of invincibility, and a destructive terror. How does this symbol help characterize Alexander the Great as both a warrior and a philosopher?

2. Zoroastrianism describes the world as a conflict between truth and order on the one hand and falsehood and chaos on the other. Discuss similarities and differences between this religion and Christianity.

3. In the novel, the military conquests of Alexander the Great are also an attempt to build a "global economy." During a

secret meeting with Alexander, Oibares, head of the Persian merchants, offers his support and asks Alexander to lead his army eastwards in order to open a safe and free trading route to India. In other chapters, told through the eyes of the Amazons, markets, caravans, and military camps are described as wandering economic centers. Discuss the different forms of economic life during this period of history.

4. The river is a sacred symbol for the Amazons. When they grow older and lose their strength for hunting and fighting, they leave the tribe and let themselves die naturally on a riverbank. Discuss why the river or water became the central element of the nomad culture.

5. In contrast to the Greek and Persian civilizations, the Amazons are nomads who live by specific nomad rules. Unlike the authoritarian king of Macedonia and the all-powerful Persian emperor, the Amazon queen is only a decision maker who gathers the views of her tribal members before issuing the final order. Compare the Amazon?s regime with other ancient political systems described in the novel and discuss how it differs.

6. The Amazons wander throughout the Asian steppes. They are orphan girls adopted by the Amazon elders. In what ways do memories of their childhoods and tribal education dominate their adult life? How do the struggles for survival in the wilderness impact their relationships with men? In what way do freedom and equality matter to an Amazon?

7. The encounter between Alexander and Alestria is also a clash of two traditions. Identify the point at which you feel Alestria suffers in her transforming from a wild warrior to a woman and how much she feels uncomfortable with being the queen of Asia.

8. How does Alexander bring political and social change to Greece and Persia? Does he bring the West and the East closer to each other? Discuss the extent of the social and cultural improvement after his passing. In what ways did Greek philosophies change Persian society and Persian refinements improve the Greek lifestyle? How does the confrontation of two administrations?Alexander and his military-democratic regime and Darius and his Persian bureaucracy, one of the oldest in the world?become the key issue in Alexander?s victory over an empire ten thousand times vaster than his own?

9. Discuss Shan Sa?s poetic prose style and the extent to which it suits the tone and content of the book. How does her choice of a first person perspective from three narrators?Alexander, Alestria, and Ania?allow her to show the reader the different points of view of each historical or fictional figure? How would this book be different if written in the third person?

Author Bio

Shan Sa was born in Beijing, China, and brought up in a traditional scholarly family. She began writing and publishing poems from the age of 7 and also began studying Chinese calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting. Her first collection of poems was published at her age of 10 and was widely lauded by the most prominent Chinese writers of the 20th century, including Ai Qing, the novelist Liu Xinwu, Yan Wenjin, and literary critic Xie Mian. When she was 14, she became the youngest member of the Beijing Writers' Association.

In 1990, as a teenager, Shan Sa left Beijing for further studies in Paris, France. She learned French and studied philosophy in a Paris university while attending courses in art history at the École du Louvre. Her passion for art led her to travel throughout Europe, visiting many local museums along the way.

In 1994, she met the painter Balthus and his Japanese wife Setsuko in Switzerland through their daughter Harumi, her closest friend. Shan Sa became their assistant. During her two years with them Shan Sa wrote her first novel in French, observed the work of the last great master of figurative painting, and learned the métier of Western painting. During this time, she also participated in organizing Balthus' retrospective exhibitions in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Beijing.

In 1997, Shan Sa returned to France and she released her first novel, ?Gate of Celestial Peace?, written during her stay in Balthus' Grand Chalet. The novel won the Prix Goncourt of best first novel. Two years later, her novel ?The Four Lives of the Willow? won the Prix Caze. In 2001, she was again awarded the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens for her novel ?The Girl Who Played Go?. Since then, she has published the novels ?Conspirators?, ?Empress?, ?Alexander and Alestria", and a collection of essays ?If We Can Meet in Tokyo at 4am?. She also published her poem collection ?The Sharp Wind and the Swift Word" and her painting collections ?The Calligrapher's Mirror? and ?The motionless clouds?. Her works have been published in 30 languages worldwide. Her poem and novels are used as literary teaching material in middle schools in China, France and Japan.

Since 2001, Shan Sa has continued to write literature and paint. Her works have been shown in Paris and New York, including the solo exhibition in Chanel Nexus Gallery, and Takashimaya Galleries in Japan, at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, and at the Pernod-Ricard Contemporary Art Exhibition Centre in Paris.

2009, Shan Sa is awarded by the French Cultural Ministry for Knight of Order of Arts and Letters. 2011, she is awarded by the French President for Knight of National Order of Merit.

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