



The Love-Artist

Jane Alison

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Why was Ovid, the most popular poet of his day, banished from Rome? Why do only two lines survive of his play *Medea*, reputedly his most passionate, most accomplished work? Between the known details of Ovid's life and these enigmas, Jane Alison has created a haunting drama of psychological manipulation, and an ingenious meditation on love, art and immortality. When Ovid encounters a woman who embodies the fictitious creations of his soon-to-be published *Metamorphoses*, he is enchanted, obsessed, and inspired. Part healer, part witch, she seems to be myth come to life, and Ovid lures her away from her home by the Black Sea to Rome. But the inexorable pull of ambition leads him to make a Faustian bargain with fate that will betray his newfound muse.

The Love-Artist Details

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Author : Jane Alison

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From Reader Review The Love-Artist for online ebook

Jane Polese says

I read this book for the Coursera course "Plagues, Witches, and War, The Worlds of Historical Fiction." I generally enjoy historical fiction and consider myself a historian. Perhaps I would have enjoyed this book more if I knew more about Ovid, his writing and Imperial Rome. It was fine...included some magical realism. However, I admit I was lost for a good amount of the story.

Kim says

Let me start off with two confessions: 1. Yeah, I bought this book in part because of the cover art---it's gorgeous! Wish I looked like that! and 2. I'm kind of scared to read historical fiction, particularly ancient history. That's because I'm this close to getting my PhD in ancient history, and most of the time when I read historical novels, I spend so much time looking for errors that I can't enjoy the story! However, with *The Love Artist* I was able to avoid this problem, partly because the author is a classicist and partly because the story she tells fills in the gaps in known history rather than retelling a story for which there is already plenty of evidence. The Roman poet Ovid, one of the most popular of his day, was exiled by the emperor Augustus for, he says "a poem and an error;" We don't know what the error was, although there are plenty of theories, many involving the emperor's granddaughter Julia, who was exiled around the same time. In *The Love Artist*, Alison provides a possible explanation, writing of Ovid's obsession with the witch Xenia whom he meets on holiday in Tomis on the Black Sea. Ovid, Xenia, and Julia all come alive as believable characters, if not always likable ones, and Alison's prose style is elegant and sparse. I was impressed that her writing was not overly expository or salacious, a problem I've had with historical novels in the past. The ending did feel a little rushed to me, and I'd be interested in hearing how this novel was received by someone who had closely studied the mystery of Ovid's exile and, contrarily, someone with little to no knowledge of ancient Roman history. I enjoyed it, and was caught up in Alison's fictional world.

Mollie Lipka says

This was an ambitious first novel for Ms. Alison, and I praise her for doing such a wonderful job in constructing so rich a tale from the mysteries of long ago. Hers is a fascinating account of Ovid, his fate, and the fate of his lost Medea. Culminating with the simultaneous exile of Ovid and Julia from Rome, this novel is hugely imaginative while ever-so-gently exploring immortality and power from the male and female perspective. The prose is beautiful and eloquent. Not once did I feel it to be overdone or heavily laden with the knowledge and references of a classicist. The Love-Artist lyrically breathes life into the mysteries surrounding Ovid as Pygmalion brought life to his Galatea. It is THAT captivating. Ms. Alison herself is brilliantly mysterious in her writing, making the story even more enchanting. This is a story that will not soon leave me, and will have me thinking for many years to come: what if?

I look forward to reading more of Ms. Alison's work and will be following this up with Malouf's *An Imaginary Life!*

Sharon says

Had this book not been assigned to me for a course, I most likely would not have picked it up. And that, my friends, would be a sorrow and a pity; I would have missed out on something brilliant.

Author Jane Alison has created one of the most lyrical novels I've ever read. Her book imagines Ovid as he writes his "Medea" (only two lines of which survive), inspired by two women in his life: Xenia and Julia.

One of the things I found most interesting about this book is how little dialogue was used. Alison shows us what the three main characters are thinking and feeling, while creating an impression that they seldom speak about those feelings or the decisions that result from them. From the moment Ovid meets Xenia in the Caucasus to the time that they part company, we have a picture of Ovid's Rome (and Xenia's disturbing visions of its future), with all of the politics and violence that were at play during his time. We also see three people steeped in their own needs and not caring that they use others around them as pawns.

The prose in this book is nothing short of gorgeous. Fans of literary and historical fiction will both find much to like here.

Brianna Audrey Wright says

I read this book for a historical fiction class I was taking through Coursera and it's probably the only reason I would've read it. Either it's written for suuuuuper intelligent people or else I'm super stupid because I didn't understand a single word. It all seemed a mumble jumble mess of random words strung together.

Pinar Celebi says

2,5/5

Savvy says

Poetic Justice

This intriguing, tightly woven tale grabbed me from the la prima pagina with its lush evocative prose and mercurial movement.

Ovid was exiled from Rome... we know from history, but scholars continue to ponder and argue the reasons for and nature of this bitterly harsh banishment. The play that was to be his masterpiece "Medea" remains forever only a few lines of enigmatic prose.

Springing from this enigma, the story of the magical Xenia ... Xenia, a foreigner, a baby left adrift, only to blossom into a very powerful enchanting female force, ablaze, untamable and capable of magical forces. Exotic and erotic, she yearns to acquire the *quinta essentia*, the substance of life! Possessing an ineffable feminine jouissance, Xenia's character is strongly sensual, yet softly childlike.

The back-story that Ms. Allison weaves is a deeply wrought, yet finely tuned instrument ...icy hot...mythically mad... and passionately portrayed!

Within this duality of human nature, sex and power converge to excite and entice the reader to travel with Xenia and Ovid over the wild animals housed beneath the stones of Rome while feeling the electricity flowing between their very souls.

I walked the stone streets and felt the marble statues; inhaled the fragrant herbs and felt the warmth of Roman baths wash over me...the prose was so radiantly rendered!

My heart knew the twist that would close this journey, but it takes careful attention to the movement in this cleverly crafted novel to fully realize what Ms. Allison ultimately offers up!

I hope to read more from this enchanting author!... I'd especially love to follow Xenia deeper into the Black Sea over the pebbles and back into that water where she came crashing up through the bubbles into the fresh air! Exhilarating!

Highly recommended!

Nikki says

Third book for October's readathon.

This one's for a class -- the Batman was too, actually. This one was for historical fiction. I'll be interested to see why it's been picked for the course. For me it was such a heated, smothering, smouldering book. The idea is fascinating, transfiguring Ovid's life and even his disgrace and death into art, as the Ovid of the story transfigures Xenia into art.

Unsubtle, in places, though. The prose is so lush, practically dripping with adjectives, adverbs; and Xenia, as a name? Evoking both the word *xenos*, stranger, and *xenia*, guest-friendship... and I'm not entirely sure the author thought about that latter meaning, because I can't really square it with the plot.

It's sort of... lovely and repellent, in the same way as the character Xenia is lovely and repellent. Overall, glad to have read it, despite my ambivalent feelings toward it.

Rachel says

Probably a 2.5 star rating, really.

I gotta say, I started *Metamorphoses* by Ovid over the summer and put it down, but if I ever manage to pick it back up again, I am definitely going to see him in a different light. She did manage to find those buttons and push!

The writing was beautiful, but I also got a whiff of trying too hard, which is always pretty fatal. It slowed down the narrative and seemed to be trying to mask some of the deficiencies of the rest of the novel.

One of my main issues with the novel was the repetitious nature of it, how many times am I going to hear about her gazing at him, him gazing at her? I thought maybe he should see somebody about those sweaty wrists of his!

The jump from loving couple to jealous and suspicious lovers was a little too steep for me as well. Really, their first time in public he goes off with another woman? His logic seemed completely screwed up, i.e. not believable, for such a smart guy, and his end goal was kind of ridiculous.

Julia seemed an add-on as well. Barely mentioned at first and then plays a pivotal role? Eh, didn't believe it, and didn't really believe her story, as her backstory was not enough to show her motivations.

It would definitely be a cool project to go through and find all the myths that she interspersed throughout and analyze the myth that it becomes, out of the truth of the story.

Wendelah1 says

I read this book for a class on historical fiction. Why it was chosen is beyond me. There is almost no dialogue, the characters are underdeveloped at best, one-dimensional stereotypes at worst. The poet Ovid is presented as a creative fraud, which I'm presuming was because it was an easier choice than trying to imagine what it's like to think like a poet when you lack imagination yourself. The lack of dialogue? Maybe she doesn't know how to write it? I can't believe this is being used in class as an example of a good historical novel.

Nancy says

Evocative novel about the banishment of the great Roman poet Ovid to the shores of the Black Sea. We know this happened but we don't know exactly why even though we have Ovid's poignant letters home in which he refers to a mistake he made but provides no details. Jane Alison, who studied classics as an undergraduate and recently has translated some of Ovid's poetry, weaves a story of love, lust, ambition, desire, vengeance, and fate in a prose that is hypnotically beautiful.

Jane says

Ovid, the Roman poet, was exiled to Tomis on the Black Sea for what he says in his "Tristia": *Carmen et error* [A poem and a mistake].

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tu...>

From this ambiguity, scholars and historians through the years have tried to puzzle out why he was exiled. Alison presents us with her speculation, giving us a lush, sensuous tale of Ovid and a mysterious "witch", Xenia, he meets at the Black Sea area [a more salubrious part than his final home]. They fall in love and he takes her to Rome--returning to Rome in the midst of his exile sounded incredible. He begins writing a tragedy of Medea with her as muse and model for the priestess. Xenia feels he has betrayed her with another woman. Jealous of his patroness, Julia, of the imperial family, she exacts a horrible vengeance on him.

I could SEE all scenes before me vividly, despite the author's sometimes purple prose. Besides the jealousy and betrayal, a main theme is the permanence of art and the artist [in this case Ovid.] Will he always be remembered through the years? As Xenia has the gift of seeing into the future he keeps asking Xenia. This is an obsession with him. The novel took awhile to pick up steam, but finally rolled on swiftly to its inexorable conclusion. With not much dialogue, this contemplative novel expresses the inner life of its characters and may be too slow-moving for some readers.

Recommended. On rereading in November 2016, I lowered my rating to a 3. This time around I felt it compared unfavorably with the other speculations on Ovid-in-exile I have read by not adhering more closely to what might have been from what we know and this iteration being too unbelievable.

There was no mention of his writings from that time: The Tristia of Ovid or Tristium Libri V. Et Epistolae Ex Ponto Libri IV,

Kelley says

This book was not horrible. I give 2 stars to books I think are okay. Maybe it deserves 3 stars. A lot of people would probably love it. I just don't enjoy this kind of book. I need an interesting, well-executed plot. Sorry, I just do. Unless you're Cormac McCarthy (or other master of prose, you know what I mean). Then you can get away with it. The author does have some beautiful moments here and there. Unfortunately, the writing is overwrought, and mostly, painful to read--each sentence tortured out, barely. The pacing is excruciating and the dialogue nearly non-existent. Some lovely, lyrical moments there though.

Sarah says

“Two offenses ruined me,” wrote Ovid, “a poem and an error.”

Using the technique of many successful historical novelists, Jane Alison takes a mystery that has remained unsolved through the ages and provides an intriguing solution. Ovid, the Roman poet best known for his masterwork *The Metamorphoses*, was exiled to the remote island of Tomis in 8 AD for reasons unknown. In Alison’s haunting interpretation, the poem is *Medea*, of which only two lines remain, and the error involves a witch and mystic from the far reaches of the Empire who becomes Ovid’s tragic muse.

After incurring the wrath of Emperor Augustus, who was upset by the indecency of his recently published erotic book, *The Art of Love*, Ovid travels to the Black Sea’s eastern shores for respite and inspiration. There he meets Xenia, a young woman with yellow-grey eyes and wild, glassy hair who seems to personify his most heartfelt fictional creations. Xenia, who lives apart from the native Phasians in this already isolated country, has the ability to glimpse the future, and what she foresees for Ovid’s legacy is extraordinary.

Enraptured by his poetry as well as by the man himself, Xenia wonders what it might be like to be “loved by the love-artist,” to be the woman who inspires his next masterpiece. She’ll soon get her wish. Ovid, craving the immortality that Xenia seems to promise, brings her back with him to Rome. There he’ll craft his new work under the secret patronage of the emperor’s granddaughter, Julia, who hates Augustus for forcing her into an unwanted marriage. Ovid has never written a tragedy before. But with Julia’s vengeful ambition urging him on, and Xenia’s apparent willingness to serve his interests, he believes he may have what it takes...

Ovid has the name recognition to attract readers to the story, but the novel as a whole belongs to Xenia. Trapped in a web of mutual obsession, she finds herself led towards a devastating finale -- unless she can use her mystical talents and innate intelligence to break away and save herself. Her journey, as she slowly awakens to Ovid's plans, is suspenseful and engrossing. The atmosphere is dark, eerie, and electrically charged.

Alison shapes her language in ways that create striking and sensual impressions in the mind. Her carefully chosen images brilliantly illustrate Ovid's hunger for the theatre of Rome: "The stage would be glowing saffron red, and there would be the murmur of all the voices, and the intricate hairstyles, and the bare shoulders, and the messages flying, and the swift, appreciative glances, and the limb-weakening applause, which has often been for him..."

In exploring the dangerous intersections between art and life, between the poem and the poet, Alison has created a highly original work that evokes the majesty of the imperial Roman world and the price exacted in the quest for literary fame.

Originally posted at Reading the Past.

Scribble Orca says

Why was Ovid, the most popular writer of his era, banished to the remote town of Tomis in the Black Sea from the seat of the Empire's power, Rome, and the side of his patron, Augustus?

Why are merely two lines of *Medea*, widely touted as his most ardent and accomplished work, the only surviving remnant of this play?

Between the historical facts of Ovid's life, his admission that a poem and a mistake were the pillars of his ruin, and these tantalising enigmas, Jane Alison has wrought a hauntingly romantic drama of psychological manipulation and sensual intrigue.

Holidaying in the Black Sea on the outskirts of the Roman Empire and avoiding the potential displeasure of Augustus, Ovid chances upon an almost unearthly woman who epitomises the fantastical elements of his about-to-be published *Metamorphoses*. A delectable, desirable, alluring combination of mystic and witch, Xenia seems myth translated into life. Ovid is enchanted, obsessed, almost as a virgin youth experiencing his first love, he is brimming with inspiration: Xenia will be the muse for his *pièce de résistance*. But this time, he renders his subject seductively dark and twisted.

When autumn arrives, Ovid tempts Xenia from her home on the coast of the Black Sea to Rome with the promise of immortality only an artist can bequeath. The ineluctable noose of ambition lures Ovid and he enters a Faustian contract, deceiving his muse and hurling them both towards a retribution he never imagined. As Ovid and Xenia become entangled in his art-inspiring-life conspiracy and the schemes of his patrons, so the reader is ensnared in this chilling yet enthralling re-telling of the events leading to Ovid's banishment.

The Love Artist is an exotic, brilliant and utterly compelling meditation on love, genius, and the artist's (and his or her muse) unswerving quest for immortality. Ms Alison's prose is as bewitching as Xenia is described, as sensual and steamy as Ovid's *The Art of Love*, and as flawlessly complex and evocative of Ancient Rome

as any cinematic poem scribed by the classical poets.

Ms Alison foreshadows the events that will eventually engulf Ovid by opening her story with the journey of his exile to Tomis, but the story proper commences in the light and heat and smells of summer and the joy of the first stirrings of unexpected, overwhelming, infatuation. As the seasons fade into winter, so the menace of Ovid's plotting and the machinations of shadowy puppeteers shroud the protagonists until each is propelled along a path that can only result in a terrifying, profoundly disturbing conclusion.

Readers of lusciously written character-driven prose, who enjoy fictional history of the ancient world, with breath-taking twists of plot and consequence, will not be disappointed with *The Love-Artist*.
