



## The Mask of Apollo

*Mary Renault*

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Set in fourth-century B.C. Greece, *The Mask of Apollo* is narrated by Nikeratos, a tragic actor who takes with him on all his travels a gold mask of Apollo, a relic of the theater's golden age, which is now past. At first his mascot, the mask gradually becomes his conscience, and he refers to it his gravest decisions, when he finds himself at the center of a political crisis in which the philosopher Plato is also involved. Much of the action is set in Syracuse, where Plato's friend Dion is trying to persuade the young tyrant Dionysios the Younger to accept the rule of law. Through Nikeratos' eyes, the reader watches as the clash between the two loosens all the pent-up violence in the city.

## The Mask of Apollo Details

Date : Published February 12th 1988 by Vintage (first published 1966)

ISBN : 9780394751054

Author : Mary Renault

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Classics, Cultural, Greece

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## From Reader Review The Mask of Apollo for online ebook

### Christy English says

This is one of my favorite books of all time...re-reading it now and loving it yet again...

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### Matt says

Such a wonderful book! I read The Praise Singer, my first foray into Renault's novels of Greece, in September last year and loved it. I wonder why I waited so long to pick this one up! The story is a fleshing out of the history of Greece in the mid-4th century BCE. The main character (who is fictional, like much of the book, but not all!) is an actor. Having chosen such a character for her novel allows Renault to travel all over the Mediterranean and to explore life much more fully than if she had selected someone more conventional like a soldier, politician, or philosopher.

The plot spends a lot of time in Syracuse and folds in a good deal of the history of Plato's Academy. There are a myriad of famous personages that it is fun to see in this story (including one very famous, handsome young general, who makes for an excellent coda to novel). Although Renault takes liberties with some of the historical details that we do not or cannot know, the book smacks of reality and seems to capture the spirit of the age better than any dry history could. This, again, is largely thanks to the main character. Nikeratos is equal parts savvy, sensitive, and sage. Following him through the novel is a delight. He falls in love often, usually with men, which must have caused some stir when the book was first published in the 60s. The love is never a big part of the action though and it is treated as a simple matter of fact. Niko's motives are most frequently explained by his dedication to the gods Dionysus and Apollo and by his commitment to his art. In the service of these, we see him travel the Mediterranean, encounter many people from different backgrounds, and perform plays (some real, some imagined by the author).

Perhaps the best part of this novel is its ability to cut through all of the worldviews that appear (political, philosophical, hedonistic) to explore what really motivates people. The picture of Plato and his disciple Dion forms the centerpiece of the novel (as you could guess from the epigraph, which is Plato's eulogy of Dion). I don't know what else to say, except that I'm sad it's over. I haven't enjoyed a historical novel so much since The Red Tent. This is a real classic. You'll lose sleep to read it. Or at least I did.

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### Alicja says

rating: 5.5/5

I'm awestruck. In short, this is an (ancient Greek) political thriller. It is probably my new favorite from Mary Renault (although I always get excited when I pick up one of her books); I just couldn't put it down. For days I carried it with me everywhere, reading every free moment I could find.

Nikeratos (Niko), a 4th century B.C. Greek tragic actor finds himself in a middle of a political drama involving among others the famous Plato and Dion. He carries with him a mask of Apollo, an old relic from the past as he travels performing (and carrying secret messages for political leaders).

Niko is such a wonderful fictional character; through his eyes we see city-states, ideas of democracy vs. tyranny, politicians, philosophers, and culture clash. Niko is born into a theatrical family, acting the only vocation he knows; it is his life. But being an actor in ancient Greece gave him the ability to freely travel between cities, bringing him straight into the middle of a political drama which he never wanted to be a part (he never claimed to know anything about politics which is great for us because we get everything explained). He meets amazingly drawn historical figures such as Plato, Dion, Dionysios (elder and son) as they play for power and rule.

Filled with philosophical and political ideas (Plato's) and a continuous questioning, this novel is a heavy read. I think I may need to read Plato's Symposium and then re-read this one to have an even better understanding of the depth of issues brought to the reader. Also, there is a slight tie in with the Alexander the Great trilogy that is really amazing, putting the happenings of this novel within an even greater historical context.

Renault's beautiful style of writing is present throughout; she seamlessly weaves descriptions of the ancient world with personal interactions/relationships. Her characters are real, complex, and compelling. They also give insight and deeper cultural understanding of ancient Greece and the vast differences between the city states. Among all this, she brings the ancient theatre to life and a perspective on acting that is unique.

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### **Terry says**

3.5 stars

I am not sure if you could find a better, or more entertaining, tour guide to ancient Greece than Mary Renault. I am constantly surprised by Renault's ability to balance the fine line between immersing me in a world that is ultimately foreign to my own, and yet one that still often feels surprisingly 'modern' and relatable given the era in which the stories are set. I never feel, on the one hand, as though the ancient Greece she has created is simply our world doing cosplay, and yet on the other hand (due largely, I think, to the urban - and urbane - nature of the protagonists and their world) I often find myself feeling very much at home here in spite of the many obvious differences between our cultures and the gulf of time that separates us.

In this outing we are once again in the environs of Athens during the classical period (this time after the trials of the Peloponnesian War and just prior to the emergence of Macedon as a great power). Our story is that of Nikeratos, a tragedian of Athens whom we follow as he not only learns his trade, but also navigates some of the shaky political events of his day. It is also the story of the rise and fall of Dion, nobleman of Syracuse and sometime pupil of Plato, as he attempts to free his city from the grip of tyranny and institute the just maxims of his former teacher.

Nikeratos, or Niko, is a man born and bred to the theatre. Following in the footsteps of his father, Niko moves from being a mere extra to ascending the ranks of his profession until he is one of the leading tragedians of his day. Renault also leavens her story with a small bit of the supernatural (something not uncommon in her work, though never an overstated element) in the form of an antique mask of Apollo Niko comes to own. Through this mask Niko is sometimes touched by the god and inspired to acts that tend to further his career and reputation. In one such act Niko defies death at the hands of a jealous fellow actor to ensure that 'the play goes on' and as a result gains the adulation of the public and the notice of the upright and pious nobleman Dion. In a lesser writer of historical fiction the two would now become the best of friends, or perhaps lovers, and Niko would be dead centre in the political struggles of Syracuse in which

Dion was to play such a large role. Renault, however, plays it slightly differently. To be sure Niko and Dion form a strong bond, Niko himself being somewhat overcome by the noble and virtuous character of the nobleman from Syracuse, but he generally remains a peripheral figure in Dion's life...one who does participate in important events from time to time due to this connection (sometimes merely as a witness and at others as a peripheral participant), but who still more or less stands at the edge of these history-shaping events, watching from the outside.

I think Renault thus manages to balance the desire (or even need) of a writer of historical fiction to have her characters partake in the great events of history as they have come down to us, and even to hob-nob with some of the most famous personages of the day (Plato, and both Dionysios I and II, tyrants of Syracuse, are examples of such people that Niko meets in this book) without making the connection seem too forced (at least in my opinion). For the most part we remain very much grounded in Niko's day to day life as an actor even as we circle the periphery of the 'great events' going on around him.

Renault had already written Sokrates into her novel *The Last of the Wine* and Aristotle and his influence would later feature in the *Alexander* trilogy, but here she scores a trifecta of famous philosophers, having Plato play a significant role in the attempts to rehabilitate the tyrants of Syracuse at the behest of his friend and former pupil Dion, with numerous mentions of his mentor and role model Sokrates, and even a walk-on by Aristotle (Aristoteles here) at small points in the story. I found this, in addition to Renault's creative attempt to re-imagine the details of the life of ancient Greek theatre, to be entertaining elements of the story. This important role given to these foundational thinkers of western thought has allowed Renault to ruminate somewhat not only on their theories, but on their real-world application. Since our viewpoint character Niko very much views the life of the Academy from the outside, whatever his friendships with its members, one might say that she is thus able to view these tenets in an almost neutral way. Renault's voice, as uttered by her characters, is always erudite and well-spoken and I found myself enjoying such gems as:

I thought, Perhaps it is impossible for a philosopher to be a king – at any rate, to be both at once. Perhaps that is only for the god

a response to Plato's *The Republic* (a work whose precepts very much infuse the novel) with which I heartily concur; not to mention:

We are weary of ourselves, and have dreamed a king. If now the gods have sent us one, let us not ask him to be more than mortal.

or

Now he had all which if he had sunk his soul to evil could have made him glad. Old Dionysios had had it and died content. He suffered because he had loved the good, and still longed after it.

which both speak to the difficult political realities incumbent upon a king that may render even the best of intentions moot in the end.

Renault's great love (one might even say worship) of Alexander shines through in an amusing scene at the end of the novel which also speaks to the power of art to move our souls and shape our lives in ways that can be both unexpected and transformative (a fact of which readers are acutely aware, I know I am always in search of such works):

It seemed that the god had said to me, "Speak for me, Nikeratos. Someone's soul is listening." Someone's always is, I suppose, if one only knew. Plato never forgot it.

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### **Jane says**

Not as enamoured with this one as I thought I'd be. I'm sure this is one of Renault's minor works. This tells the story of Dion of Syracuse [philosopher from Plato's Academy] as seen through the eyes of Nikeratos [Niko], a tragic actor. Making her protagonist an actor, Renault gave Niko the freedom to travel all over and comment on the action and people he meets. Many of them are historical; in the last chapter he meets young Alexander and Hephaestios. Apparently, even the youth Alexander is already charismatic. We do meet the philosopher Plato, but any of his ideas given are in a disjointed manner. Also we got a great description of the nuts and bolts of the Greek theater; much is Renault's conception but plausible.

From a young age Niko's actor father exposes him to the stage and he becomes an even better actor than his dad, through the novel. At one point he comes into possession of an old mask of the god Apollo to whom he talks and fancies it gives him counsel or advice on occasion. Niko's travels involve him in politics and he witnesses the rise of Dion as tyrant of Syracuse. The book was slow-moving and characters seemed flat. Renault's writing did put us right into the worlds of ancient Greece and Syracuse.

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### **Rozonda says**

A Pagan book if ever there was one. Mary Renault confronts the joy of life and the joy of philosophy in the life of Niko, a Greek actor, who gets to meet Plato and his Academy, philosopher king Dion of Syracuse and, in the end, young Alexander the Great.

Packed with adventure and very deep at the same time, I consider it to be one of Renault's masterpieces.

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### **mixal says**

Interesting but not very engaging book. It might be caused by POV character who is an actor. This allows to describe Hellenistic culture from quite fresh angles, but overall it proved to be a bit hard to get into. I was reading the book very much because of Plato, but he is there always somewhere out of reach or saying something that the actor does not understand so it is not included in the text. What a pity...

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### **Matt Benzing says**

Many years ago a theater history professor recommended this to me, and I have just now gotten around to reading it. Very enjoyable book for anyone with an interest in theatre or classical civilization. The author creates a credible ancient world and builds her story of political intrigue out of real people and events; her protagonist is just alien enough in his assumptions and attitudes to make a believable citizen of a world far from our own, while being just modern enough to allow the reader to identify with him.

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### **Deb says**

Renault's classic tale gives us Greek actor Nikeratos, who participates in and observes the fall of the tyrants of Syracuse. Nikeratos is an admirable character--talented, loyal, compassionate, insightful into human frailty, and capable of understanding philosophy. This leads him to cross paths with one of Athen's great treasures, Plato's Academy. He meets Plato and many of his followers, becomes a trusted friend, and an acolyte of sorts to Plato's "ideal king," Dion of Syracuse. Dion was the late Archon Dionysios' only trusted aide. When the old man dies suddenly, Dion attempts to guide Dionysios the Younger to lead according to Plato's teachings. The sad progress of this attempt makes for great drama that has nothing to do with the theater.

Meanwhile, Renault shares her vision of what the Greek theater was like in its golden age, based on historical research, studies of the surviving bits and pieces of ancient theater machinery and the few records of the era. Anyone intrigued by the beginnings of professional theater performance should enjoy the adventures and successes of Nikeratos and his many friends.

Readers may also enjoy Renault's other Grecian novels, including *\*The Praise Singer\**, *\*The Last of the Wine\**, and her Alexander trilogy, *\*Fire From Heaven\**, *\*The Persian Boy\**, and *\*Funeral Games\**.

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### **John Nevola says**

Most of the poor reviews for this book are from disgruntled schoolchildren forced to read it as a mandatory assignment. One must have a taste for this period and a desire to learn more about it before it could be fully appreciated.

Mary Renault immerses the reader in the art, culture, habits and times of ancient Greece. Told through the eyes and thoughts of an actor (all of whom wore masks on stage), Renault tells of the conflicts between logic and passion, good and evil and power and weakness. She does that so convincingly, one might suspect she stepped out of a time machine from that period.

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### **Brenda Clough says**

A wonderful book. Mary Renault is as good as your own personal time machine (if you do not mind only ever traveling to classical Greece). She is also a total whiz at taking you into a specialized world -- in this case, the theater -- and making its thrills and excitements your own.

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### **James says**

I love the fiction of Mary Renault and this is the first of her novels that I read. At the time I already had begun to acquire a passion for ancient Greece from a wonderful Latin teacher in high school. Luckily for us in addition to teaching us Latin our teacher imbued in us an interest in learning about everything classical that grew for me into more reading and led me to the discovery of Mary Renault and her historical fiction set in ancient Greece. The story of The Mask of Apollo involves the world of live theater and political intrigue in the Mediterranean at the time.

The narrator, Nikeratos is a successful professional actor, and Renault vividly evokes the technologies and traditions of classic Greek Tragedy. With detailed recreations of what might have been involved in the staging of a theatrical production of the time, she describes the music, scenery, mechanical special effects devices, and especially the practice of the three principal actors sharing the various roles in a performance, along with authentic gossip involved in these casting decisions.

Nikeratos, is an invented character, but real historical figures such as Dion of Syracuse and Plato make appearances. It is Renault's seamless blend of real historical characters within her fictional stories that makes her novels come alive for me. I even sometimes think, being an inveterate play-goer, what would it be like to pray or prepare a sacrifice for the success of the play before-hand. Some plays could use the help. I would recommend Mary Renault's novels of Ancient Greece to anyone who has an interest in our classical Greek heritage.

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### **Jack Massa says**

In one quintessentially Greek moment from this superb novel, the narrator recalls the story of a father of two Olympic champions. At the moment when his sons are crowned, the crowd chants to him to "Die now," because, of course, no moment of his life could ever again be so good.

So, in finishing *The Mask of Apollo* am I tempted to chant to myself: "Give up reading historical fiction now."

'Nuff said.

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### **Christin says**

My first venture into non-Alexander Mary Renault. I can't help but be sucked in by the first page. Something about her work... it just takes you by the hand and gently leads you into the world and you never ever want to leave. At least, I don't.

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### **Margaret says**

Nikeratos is an actor in fourth century BC Greece, following in the footsteps of his famous father. Everywhere he performs, he brings a golden mask of Apollo, to which he goes for advice and guidance. After an impressive performance at Delphi, Niko meets Dion of Syracuse, who is a distinguished politician and a dear friend of Plato's, the inspiration for Plato's philosopher-king. Niko is drawn to Dion and because of this is also drawn into the political turmoil in Sicily after King Dionysios dies.

Renault is hands-down one of the best historical fiction writers I've read. Her sense of place is impeccable and seamless, nothing feels anachronistic, and her characters are perfectly of their time and place. She understands her setting so well that she can convey it to the reader without resorting to boring infodumps or overly long explanations in dialogue, or relying on the reader's knowledge of ancient Greece. Nearly all of

her characters are historical (with the exception of Nikeratos himself), and her fictional portrayal of them chimes beautifully with their historical selves.

In *The Mask of Apollo*, Renault's use of an actor as the viewpoint character is brilliant. Niko understands how a crowd works, because he plays to them all the time, whereas the politicians, who ought to know, really don't. Yet Niko also understands what the politician-philosophers are trying to do, even as they can't quite accomplish it. The last little bit, where he meets Alexander and realizes that here is the student Plato needed and will never get, is simply perfect.

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## Gary Foss says

It's taken me a while to write this review, mostly because I'm not confident that I can really do this book justice. My first attempt devolved into a series of gushy praise, so I figured I'd best get a little distance before giving it another go....

Rather than leap into a bunch of blind admiration, I'm going to let you decide for yourself why Mary Renault's version of Greek history through literature is worth reading. This is the speech attributed to Dion by Plutarch before the battle to retake Syracuse, and a little of Plutarch's narrative. I have no doubt Ms. Renault read her Plutarch—her scholarship is without question—as one of the core reasons she wrote this book:

“Men of Peloponnesus and of the confederacy, I asked for your presence here, that you might consider your own interests. For myself, I have no interests to consult while Syracuse is perishing, and, though I may not save it from destruction, I will nevertheless hasten thither, and be buried in the ruins of my country. Yet if you can find in your hearts to assist us, the most inconsiderate and unfortunate of men, you may to your eternal honor again retrieve this unhappy city. But if the Syracusans can obtain no more pity nor relief from you, may the gods reward you for what you have formerly valiantly done for them, and for your kindness to Dion, of whom speak hereafter as one who deserted you not when you were injured and abused, nor afterwards forsook his fellow-citizens in their afflictions and misfortunes.”

Before he had yet ended his speech, the soldiers leapt up, and with a great shout testified their readiness for the service, crying out, to march immediately to the relief of the city. The Syracusan messengers hugged and embraced them, praying the Gods to send down blessings upon Dion and the Peloponnesians. When the noise was pretty well over, Dion gave orders that all should go to their quarters to prepare for their march, and, having refreshed themselves, come ready armed to their rendezvous in the place where they now were, resolving that very night to attempt the rescue.

Here is Ms. Renault's version of that same speech and narrative:

“I have called you here so that you can decide what you think best for you. For me, there is no choice. This is my country. I must go; and if I cannot save her, her ruins shall be my grave. But if you can find it in your hearts to help us, foolish and wretched as we are, you may to your eternal honor still save this unhappy city. If that is too much to ask, then farewell, and all my thanks. May the gods bless you for your past courage, and the kindness you have shown to me. If you speak of me after, say I did not stand by to see you wronged, nor forsake my fellow citizens in disaster.”

I don't think he could have gone on, but the cheering drowned his voice. They yelled his name like a war cry, then shouted, "To Syracuse!" I suppose Hellanikos made a speech of thanks; I think he embraced Dion. I could scarcely see for tears.

So, not only has she got a lot of chutzpah to take on Plutarch, I think she does a fine job of it. We might attribute much of the stilted nature of that original to the inadequacies of translation and the formality of the time, but even with that in mind her version reads much more smoothly to modern eyes and ears. It trips right off the page as if it's being spoken aloud. Some folks might not find it as rousing as Shakespeare's *Henry V* Agincourt speech, but I'd rank it right up there, especially when you consider that Dion was speaking to free men—or, at least, relatively free men who were prepared to leave, not men in a cornered army, under thumb of their social superiors living under the threat of death should they retire from the field. Shakespeare's Henry is firing up men in servitude to a king (again, relatively) and whose concept of glory is less pure to modern thought. They will fight or die. Dion's soldiers are fighting that others might be free, and that's a tougher sell to the average guy behind a spear....

In that sense, she also summarizes the concept of kingship when her protagonist reflects

To me it seemed that Dion, though a king in exile, was still a king; he might lead no armies, but men would serve him with their minds, for by believing in him they could believe better in themselves.

Most people are looking for that.... Tragically, most seem to fall prey (and pray) to less than noble versions of that ideal, and it is that failure that is, I'm sure, at the heart of most human suffering. The tightrope of leadership's role between selflessness and what we might call self-actualization is at the heart of the Greek philosophical struggle. I honestly can't say that it is the heart of the modern one.

In this installment, Ms. Renault's main character is an actor, Nikerators or Niko as he is most often called. Greek drama is itself a kind of metaphor for high drama in modern parlance, and on a surface level the juxtaposition of a lowly actor with one of the movers and shakers of Greek history like Dion might seem like a bit of a leap. However, her choice is an astute one. Who better to judge the merits of a speech than an actor on the Greek stage from which we derive many of our standards of public speaking? The word genius is often bandied about today to describe a particularly intelligent or gifted person, but the origin of that word has a spiritual connection that comes from the Greek concept. In the Greek sense, "genius" was the guardian spirit or tutelary deity that guided the person through life.

Where we have lost track of this concept is in embodying it in a biological function. To us, genius is organic. A person can be a genius; it's a function of the number of crinkles in his/her cerebrum, a relative bump on the brain, or some hormonal hyperactivity. Genius meant something more external, spiritual and demonstrative to the ancients. It had intrinsic qualities like our version of the idea, but it was also extrinsic in that it blurred the lines between faith, duty and daily life. When her lead character in *Mask of Apollo* speaks to his patron and is spoken to by the god through the medium of a dramatic mask (actors wore masks on the ancient Greek stage for anyone unaware of that fact) he is not engaging in a religious mania, a delusion, a flight of fancy or just an inner dialogue externalized onto a particular focus—he is in communication with his genius. Or, you could see it as the exactly opposite: he's doing all those things (engaging in a religious mania, a delusion, a flight of fancy or just an inner dialogue externalized onto a particular focus) as a means of communicating with what we would now equate to something like meditation or an athlete's mental focus training. It's not either of those things exactly, however, because we've lost that sense of the genius as material *and* spirit.

*Mask of Apollo* is Mary Renault's attempt to get that spiritual sense of genius back in the modern world. She

gives it to us in the example set by Niko and that retelling of Dion's rousing speech. Her revision of Plutarch is done in order to update the speech that roused an army into something more rousing to a modern reader, and in doing so she shows us how Dion's genius manifested as a leader. (Plus, I think she just couldn't resist "fixing" Plutarch's version....)

In doing so, she once again covers the main historical points of the period that she describes and breathes them to life in believable and poignant ways. The physical peril of Plato's "guest" status in various city/states and the social pressure that he is put under by leaders who really want him around as a trophy is a great example of how she manages to present the lives of the ancients in a way that is comprehensible to the reader, even if it is alien to our own time and values. That makes this period piece one just as strong as any other period writer that I can think of, and superior to most. Because of the primacy of the Greek world in the rest of the Western literary canon, in our history and throughout the culture, that makes this book an important achievement.

I highly recommend this one to anyone with a literary bent at all, let alone an interest in the period that she is describing.

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### **Nigel says**

Following the life of actor Nikeratos and his various adventures touring the classical world, in particular his friendship with Dion of Syracuse and Plato the philosopher as they try to forge a Republic in Syracuse.

Once again Renault creates and inhabits a character who seems to in turn inhabits and evokes his world perfectly, and more than that who lives and breathes the theatre, which informs every aspect of his life and outlook. It's a breathtaking achievement, seemingly effortless, utterly absorbing the reader and bringing the ancient world to life. It's odd, though that the tone of a book about art and which views art as a mode of worship of the gods, should feel so pragmatic and grounded in the craft of the actor and the mechanisms and logistics of production and touring, in contrast with the Theseus novels, about heroism and kingship, which have an almost dream-like quality to them with the feeling that of the divine ready to manifest around every rock and tree. Niko communes with Apollo via an old mask, and often feels the eyes of the god upon him and receives oracles as he wrestles with issues of conscience and obligation, but Niko makes his offerings to a god, he doesn't feel and act as if he is half a god himself.

Niko is a good and decent man trying to do right by his own talents and maybe contribute something to the larger events he finds himself a small part of. His voice is bold and confident and self-assured and his first and second-hand accounts of the story of Syracuse and Dion and Plato are wonderful. Another brilliant book by Renault.

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### **Deb says**

This is a fascinating look at theatre in ancient Greece and the part actors played in the politics of the time. I also dig the way the author writes about the sexual mores of the era. Same sex relationships were fairly commonplace and that is how they are portrayed in the novel. A bold move for a writer in the fifties.

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### **Lisa (Harmonybites) says**

My introduction to Mary Renault was *The King Must Die*, the first of two novels about Theseus--it was actually assigned reading in high school. What impressed me so much there was how she took a figure out of myth and grounded him historically. After that I quickly gobbled up all of Renault's works of historical fiction set in Ancient Greece. The two novels about Theseus and the trilogy centered on Alexander the Great are undoubtedly her most famous of those eight novels, and I'd add *The Last of the Wine*, about the Peloponnesian War, as among her best.

By that standard this is one of Renault's, lesser, not as memorable, works. In a way, this feels like a sequel to *The Last of the Wine*. There Socrates was an important character, here it's Plato. I definitely got the feeling from Renault's novels that she had two historical passions: Alexander the Great and Plato, and the idea that the first was the embodiment of the second's ideal--or would have been, had he had a chance to shape him. The main focus of this novel though is Nikeratos, an Athenian born into the acting trade. And it's certainly interesting seeing the portrait of ancient Greek theater. And compared to much of historical fiction, this is still a marvel. I'd probably recommend *The King Must Die* as an introduction to Renault, then read the sequel, *The Last of the Wine* and the Alexander works before hitting this one--but this is definitely a pleasure.

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### **Simon Mcleish says**

The Mask of Apollo is one of my favourite straight historical novels (using the word "straight" to distinguish it from crossover historical crime novels, which seem to have taken over fiction set in the past since the sixties).

Set in the fourth century BC, the narrator of the novel is a notable Athenian actor named Nikeratos, who travels to Syracuse (then a Greek city) and accidentally becomes involved with the city state's turbulent politics. Syracuse was ruled by a tyrant, Dionysius, who is dying as Nikeratos approaches the city from the sea, fresh from a triumph in Athens with a play written by the ruler himself. The problem is with his successor. Dionysius had a son, also named Dionysius, but kept him from any semblance of power during his lifetime, leaving him lacking in both judgement and confidence. He also has a nephew, Dion, who is highly respected and who was given many privileges by his uncle (including the right to appear in his presence armed, something no one else was allowed to do). But even so Dion is not likely to be named as the successor over Dionysius' own son, nor (with his suspicious involvement with the foreign "sophist" Plato) popular with other powerful figures in the Syracusan court.

The combination of theatre and politics works well. Renault makes Nikeratos a character based on ideas of what an important actor manager would be like in the twentieth century, a Terry or someone from that kind of acting family. I don't normally like the use of characters with a modern outlook in historical novels, but here it works well. This is partly because nothing is really known about what an ancient Greek theatrical production was like backstage, and it seems likely that the concerns of actors then were similar to those of actors today: gossip about other people in the profession, upstaging and working together, the audience's lack

of understanding, and, of course, sex. And in other ways, the character is not at all contemporary. Nikeratos is a proper pagan Greek, who believes that an old fashioned mask of Apollo given to him by another actor is periodically inhabited by the spirit of the god, and treats it as a kind of shrine.

The Mask of Apollo could be considered an archetypical historical novel. It is narrated by an (imaginary) character at the centre of a series of interesting historical events, who knows people the reader may well have heard of (Plato, Dionysius father and son, Dion; Aristotle and Philip of Macedon - the father of Alexander the Great - are also mentioned). Nikeratos isn't interested in politics, and becomes involved with the Syracusan power struggles unwillingly - and this is useful to the story, because he constantly needs things explained to him which would not be needed by a more involved politician but are going to also be unfamiliar to many readers. The history of Greek Syracuse is probably not terribly well known today, but it is eventful and has fascinating characters, so makes an excellent choice of subject for a historical novel. It also balances out the much better known Athenian characters (Plato in particular, as someone whose influence on the development of European culture is immense), even though Nikeratos is himself from that city. And even in the parts of the book set in Athens, Renault manages to combine the relatively unfamiliar with things which are much more likely to be obscure or unknown to a modern reader.

The background is meticulously researched yet made accessible to the reader without becoming a series of lectures on the ancient Greek way of life. In fact, I would say that the novel is one of the very greatest of its type, not just one I like personally. Renault does not indulge in the kind of literary games which can be seen in The French Lieutenant's Woman, almost contemporary, but still achieves a literate power without this postmodern slant.

One of the themes explored by the novel is the nature of personal pagan religious feeling. Nikeratos' attitude to the mask is one of several examples of devotion to a god or goddess to whom an individual worshipper feels a particular affinity. This is striking as it is a major difference to today's largely secular western world, where even those who attend places of worship tend to separate off their everyday life from their religious observances; the chosen deity was a major part of the worshipper's daily life, with an idol (like the mask) as a focus for the relationship. Evangelical Christians talk about a personal God, but the very fact of monotheistic belief makes this God seem much more remote and unconcerned than who is a patron of your profession, or shares your name; and the Protestant history of deism (a God who is relatively uninvolved with His creation) in their theology makes this remoteness even greater. Ignoring the issue of whether or not either the pagan or Christian gods are real, this seems to me to be less appealing to the imagination.

So The Mask of Apollo is interesting, readable, thought provoking, well researched, and has good characters.

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