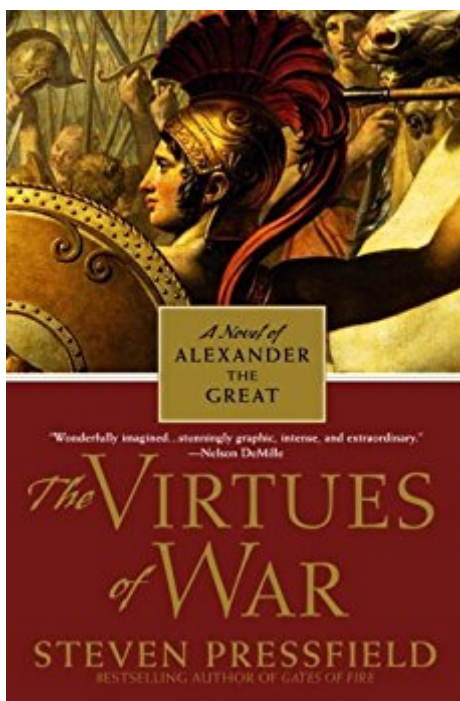


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The Virtues Of War



Synopsis

BONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Steven Pressfield's *The Profession*. I have always been a soldier. I have known no other life. So begins Alexander's extraordinary confession on the eve of his greatest crisis of leadership. By turns heroic and calculating, compassionate and utterly merciless, Alexander recounts with a warrior's unflinching eye for detail the blood, the terror, and the tactics of his greatest battlefield victories. Whether surviving his father's brutal assassination, presiding over a massacre, or weeping at the death of a beloved comrade-in-arms, Alexander never denies the hard realities of the code by which he lives: the virtues of war. But as much as he was feared by his enemies, he was loved and revered by his friends, his generals, and the men who followed him into battle. Often outnumbered, never outfought, Alexander conquered every enemy the world stood against him "but the one he never saw coming. . . .

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Customer Reviews

In the light of the current world environment, you need to read this book. While Mr. Pressfield played on Sun Tzu's title in his 2002 take-control-of-your-life manual, *The War of Art*, he goes right to the

heart of the matter in *Virtues*: this book is Alexander the Great's *Art of War*. Where previous Pressfield novels detailed what the individual combatant was thinking and feeling, *Virtues* focuses on the leader, the man in charge of it all, logistics, material, tactics, strategy, morale and every other aspect of war. In six short years since the publication of his classic *Gates of Fire*, Steven Pressfield has set a new standard for historical fiction and sits firmly entrenched at the top of a list of talented writers in that genre. The master's attention to detail through diligent research is without equal. As importantly to his readers, Mr. Pressfield weaves a tale that keeps us hooked on his work from first to last page. His details do not detract or bog down the telling of the tale but serve it. Like its predecessors, *The Virtues of War* left me satiated if not emotionally drained when I read its final words: "The sarissa's song is a sad song He pipes it soft and low. I would ply a gentler trade, says he, But war is all I know. The wind rose in that moment, lifting the corner of Alexander's cloak. I saw his heel tap Corona's flank. He reined about and started for the camp, surrounded by his officers." All of the Pressfield Greek Histories as I've come to call them are narrated. In his previous work, *Last of the Spartans*, Mr. Pressfield took a big chance and told much of the story through the words of a woman, no small task for a man who did spend time in the U.S. Marine Corps.

If you are looking for a historical novel of great psychological depth that explores the complexities of one of history's more enigmatic figures, look elsewhere. Alexander the Great was not a personality of more complexity than any one of us. The only subject he excelled at, the only one he showed any interest in, was war. Pressfield has no gripping passages describing an anguished Alexander locked in a moral debate with himself over the justness of his cause or the legitimacy of his methods, because there is no historical evidence that Alexander had any such doubts. "Since I was prepared to pay with my own life," Pressfield's Alexander tells his father early in the novel, "so I was sanctioned to take the life of the foe." It would be wrong, though, and Pressfield conveys this well, to conclude that Alexander lacked human feelings or emotion. Within his realm of war Alexander comes across as a believable human being, perhaps much like Patton or Guderian had they been absolute rulers of their countries instead of merely talented generals. Alexander, in the speech just quoted, is not justifying butchery, but explaining to a skeptical father how he can fraternize with members of the enemy's elite fighting units, even exchange gifts with them, and then slaughter them quickly and efficiently the next day. Indeed, creating strong emotional bonds was and is the foundation of a unit's fighting power. So Alexander can trade barracks banter with sergeants one minute and bawl tears with his senior commanders the next. He sleeps on a rude campaign cot and shares all the privations of the march. At one point near the end of their 22,000 mile campaign, he

bares his chest and asks if any of his now reluctant compatriots can show more battle scars than he.

This novel is a worthwhile entertainment. Pressfield remains one of the more interesting writers dealing with ancient warfare. He has his strengths and weaknesses, but over all he's worth a reader's time. This is not a definitive treatment of Alexander. There are quite a few aspects of his life that Pressfield chooses not to deal with, probably because others have already done so, like Mary Renault and Valerio Massimo Manfredi. This is okay by me in that he gives you a pretty streamlined novel here. Pressfield is a writer that works with an audience in mind. I've heard him say that *Tides of War* was his favorite novel, but it was also one of his less successful. Readers seemed to tire of the slow pace of it, the back and forth of its political machinations and perhaps an unsatisfying resolution. So Pressfield hasn't repeated that here. He starts the novel strongly and moves straight ahead with an even pace. I think his weaknesses are in terms of character complexity and development. Alexander is a confusing figure; this novel doesn't do anything to change that, although Pressfield seems to want to. Some of his speeches fell strangely flat to me, more like television bravura than the true words of the world's greatest general. And at times he does say and do things that seem to smack of twentieth century, romanticized ideology. Pressfield is no master of form. He chooses to tell the whole story in first person, creating the rather artificial proposal that we're actually hearing Alexander tell his story to a young man who's writing it all down. This doesn't really hold up to scrutiny - nobody tells a story like this, with exact dialogue, with careful authorial details and complete chronological order - but perhaps the point is that we're not supposed to scrutinize.

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