



# The Golden Mean

*Annabel Lyon*

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Aristotle struggles to match his ideas against the warrior culture that is Alexander's birthright. He feels that teaching this startling, charming, sometimes horrifying boy is a desperate necessity. And that what the boy – thrown before his time onto his father's battlefields – needs most is to learn the golden mean, that elusive balance between extremes that Aristotle hopes will mitigate the boy's will to conquer.

Aristotle struggles to inspire balance in Alexander, and he finds he must also play a cat-and-mouse game of power and influence with Philip in order to manage his own ambitions.

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Exploring this fabled time and place, Annabel Lyon tells her story in the earthy, frank, and perceptive voice of Aristotle himself. With sensual and muscular prose, she explores how Aristotle's genius touched the boy who would conquer the known world. And she reveals how we still live with the ghosts of both men.

## **The Golden Mean Details**

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Author : Annabel Lyon

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# From Reader Review The Golden Mean for online ebook

## Nathan says

I have read entirely too many ponderous and self-aware books lately, books written to please the author first and the reader second, books whose construction is as much the point of writing the book as its contents. I only realised that when I read "Golden Mean", because it is not such a book. It's like the first time you have a really good steak and realise that all the others, those artistic meat arrangements, were too focused on visual taste and not enough on gustatory taste. "Golden Mean" was that great steak to me.

"Golden Mean" reminds me of a Roman statue. When you encounter one, you're taken by the subject of the statue: how beautiful and serene they look. Then you realize they're made of marble, incredibly hard, and it was chipped away, and all this smooth serenity is the byproduct of hard work. But you don't think "gosh that must have been difficult" or "what a work of sculpture!" first, you appreciate the subject that shines through.

There's no challenging construction or postmodern self-awareness here. "Golden Mean" is written simply, with the occasional rare word thrown in for good effect. It doesn't aim to boggle you with the research that Lyon did, but rather gently guides you through the history and nature of the times without making you feel like you should be taking notes to keep up. The one paragraph of dialogue that did make me blink, full of military tactics and political strategy involving alliances and borders and generals with unpronounceable names, turns out to have been the one that made the lead character doze off. Lyon wrote perfectly for my ability to enjoy and to keep up.

The book follows Aristotle as he becomes tutor to Macedonian prince Alexander (the boy who will famously weep when he runs out of lands to conquer), and gives emotional context to Aristotle's relationship with Alexander, Aristotle's wife, slaves, Alexander's father, and more. The writing is simple, the story is straightforward (there's no mystery or surprise twist), but the relationships are deep and layered. Men and boys, fathers and sons, all connect, misunderstand, heal, and reflect on their relationships with each other, but never to the point where it feels like an episode of Dr Phil in togas.

The delight, though, is Aristotle. He is the sort of person you'd love to have dinner with. He's depressed, he pays great attention to the world around him, he's wise and thoughtful. My dimly-remembered bits of Aristotle make me suspect that this is a generous and anachronistic portrayal, but it brings him to life with the bustling energy and keen intellect of an 18th century natural philosopher. Lyon has created the Aristotle you wish had been, and to meet him is reason enough to read this book.

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## Caravaggion says

DNF

ah yes my favourite brand of sexism: "historically accurate" sexism  
bonus points if its written by a woman too

listen, the sexism is kind of the thing that made me dislike this book most but because it is "so historically accurate" and so absolutely necessary, here's a few other things that bothered me:

- weirdly modern speech and phrases that ruin the mood
- Guys Being Dudes no one can have a conversation without swearing bc they are all such manly men who talk like real guys
- litterally nothing happens
- i see nothing happening
- this book is 80% descriptions of weird medical procedures people in ancient greece apparently used to practice and i do not care one bit about those ew ew no pls spare me the details

ok but listen

#### THE SEXISM

like, i understand ok, i understand men in ancient greece were extra sexist i do grasp the historical context BUT why do people still write books where it is not portrayed as a bad thing  
why do women write books in the pov of a guy being really disgusting to women  
how can you do that to yourself  
why do you create female characters with no depth or importance

i just cant make myself care abt this book enough to finish it

((also, as alexanders biggest fan or sth, this book had way too little alexander action but ok))

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### **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

In a short sentence, this is the story of Aristotle's experience tutoring a young Alexander the Great of Macedon. But it is, of course, much more than that. It begins with Aristotle, his wife Pythias, the young son of his cousin, Callisthenes, and all their slaves and household possessions, travelling to Pella, the capital of Macedon, to deliver a message from Hermias, ruler of a minor satrap where they've been living. As an adolescent, Aristotle lived with his family in Pella (his father was appointed royal physician to King Amyntas) and he was a friend of Philip, now king of Macedon. Philip insists Aristotle stay in Pella instead of continuing their journey to Athens, where Aristotle was a student of Plato as a young man and where he still hopes to be appointed as master of the Academy.

Philip also insists that Aristotle become one of his son Alexander's tutors. Alexander, a boy of thirteen at the beginning of the book, is inquisitive, a bit precocious, very bright, but also highly conscious of appearances in front of all his companions, who he will one day rule since his older brother, Arrhidaeus, has been a child-like half-wit ever since a childhood illness robbed him of his intellect and motor skills.

The story follows Aristotle over the years, with alternating, lengthy flashbacks to his own past: growing up in Stageira, Chalcidice (he was born in 384 BCE), his relationship with his own father, moving to Pella; and, later, about his parents' deaths (plague) and moving to Athens to become one of Plato's students.

While I vaguely remember studying a bit of Alexander the Great at uni (must have been in Ancient Civs; my uni wasn't able to offer anything but European history), I honestly couldn't remember anything much about him, and I had forgotten even the basic details (like that he was the son of Philip and came from Macedon). I have no recollection of Aristotle being part of the story - I'm sure it's common knowledge, but it's been a long time since I studied or read about this period of history, and I don't think I've ever known much about Aristotle at all. He's one of the three "fathers of Western philosophy", along with Plato and Socrates, but as for how he actually lived his life? I've heard that readers who know a lot about the period, about Alexander

and Aristotle already, can get a lot more out of this book in terms of references etc., but as a reader without that background, I still got a lot out of the book and enjoyed the story a great deal.

I'm often a bit leery of historical fiction that's heavily based on real people and real events - I'm thinking back especially to *Here Be Dragons* about the Welsh prince Lochlan and his French bride: they can suffer from a kind of anxious second-guessing, a fear of doing the characters justice, and trying to get in all the context and detail of the historical side of the story. The end result can be a stiff, rigid story, bogged down by historical details that are clumsily incorporated and just sound awkward, and characters that aren't allowed to breathe. I like it when authors take some artistic license, some risk even, and use their imaginations a bit. There's always the danger of pissing off too many history buffs who get offended, but with a character like Aristotle - and probably Alexander and all the others, as well - not much is really known about them so there's not much danger of getting things "wrong" (only of interpreting them in a way someone else might disagree with).

Having Aristotle tell the story in first-person (and in present-tense, though I don't think it added anything to the story), and since he's an academic, a philosopher, a scientist and a teacher, he's easily able to explain things, give context, and provide just the right kind of detail to join the dots for readers like me. I had the funny impression of awe, especially at first: this is *Aristotle*!! As in, this is a real famous person, talking! Not many authors would take the first-person viewpoint of a character as Big as Aristotle, but it works so much better than if it'd been in third-person omniscient.

Aristotle's personality comes across vividly, yet it's subtle too. Little pompous self-deprecating asides to himself ("I invent a word for the sake of clever conversation, the verb *to Cassandra*." p.104), his perception of the machinations of others' thought processes and his own short-comings, his wisdom that it often very modern in feel, and at other times typically archaic and patriarchal. It was impressive, how much they knew and understood about the human body, for instance, but also somewhat cute, the connections and leaps of logic they took to cover gaps in their knowledge. I even had a nice giggle over this one:

My father explained to me once that human male sperm was a potent distillation of all the fluids in the body, and that when those fluids became warm and agitated they produced foam, just as in cooking or sea water. The fluid or foam passes from the brain into the spine, and from there through the veins along the kidneys, then via the testicles into the penis. In the womb, the secretion of the man and the secretion of the woman are mixed together, though the man experiences the pleasure in the process and the woman does not. Even so, it is healthy for a woman to have regular intercourse, to keep the womb moist, and to warm the blood. [pp.154-5]

For such a relatively short book (my edition is 276 pages plus an Afterword that brings it to 282 pages), it is densely written and somewhat slow reading. The writing, though, is really very good: consistent, strong, sometimes lyrical and beautiful, and in general fresh and distinct. It wasn't a writing style that I read easily: the way a train of thought progresses, for instance, or how it jumped around a bit, quite suddenly, would tend to throw me - but I still admire it for its skill and for being so firmly grounded in Aristotle's voice.

Alexander, too, was an intriguing character, made more so by whatever knowledge you have of his life as a whole (and you're bound to know *something* about him!). I didn't have any real preconceptions of what kind of a person he was, but something in the blurb gave me the impression, before I started reading, that he was unpredictable, headstrong and unable to empathise. Possibly because it described him as "sometimes horrifying". But Alexander is presented as a much more complex character, and his loneliness comes across

clearly.

You can learn a great deal about Macedonian culture, and the differences in culture that existed between all the kingdoms and city-states at the time, as well as get a refresher in the history of the time. Lyon was able to smoothly incorporate a great wealth of detail into the story, though outside the bubble of the story, it's all a big blank. Perhaps her greatest achievement with this story is how real and human it all is. She really brought it to life, with all its glories and its flaws, and without overburdening the narration with excessive detail, was able to create pretty clear images of the people and places - especially the people, whose vividly rendered characters speak louder than any physical descriptions that are given (Lyon relies more on the former than the latter; in fact, I have no idea what most of the characters look like, beyond height or maybe hair colour).

This is a very fine achievement, and the only trouble I had with it was the aforementioned style, and the way it felt *too* controlled, on too tight a rein. It is a fascinating study of the people and the period, not least of Aristotle and Alexander who are the main focus, though maybe if it were a bit longer and more, ah, relaxed, I would have relaxed into it better.

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### **Julia says**

I really enjoy reading historical fiction. It is hard not to learn something new from a certain period in history, and this novel was no different.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher is the narrator of this story. It is from his perspective that we learn about his time, about 7 years, as the tutor of Alexander (soon to be The Great) and son of King Philip of Macedon.

Aristotle is hoping to succeed the great Plato as leader of the Academy in Athens when King Philip asks (commands) him to tutor his errant son, Alexander. This is in the capital city of Pella. Aristotle and Philip were boyhood friends, but now Philip has the power to control Aristotle's very fate.

Alexander proves to be a precocious student, but is in desperate need of a mentor and teacher. At the age of 17, he is handed the throne after the death of his father and was forced to learn quickly how to be a leader and an adult.

I was afraid this might be a dry and or academic account of this time period, but took pleasure in the prose used by Annabel Lyon. There were other characters in the story that were of great interest as well.

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### **Kate says**

This novel sounded exciting to me at first, because I was sure a story about such prominent and powerful historical figures would be interesting. I felt the book was less focused on history and characters, and more on some of the philosophies Aristotle promoted. The novel focuses greatly on family relationships, that of Aristotle and his own father, of Alexander and his father Philip or his mother Olympias. The relationship of tutor to student was explored, but not as much as I felt was needed. It felt as soon as the author really started to dig into Alexander and Aristotle's relationship, she would pull back and take us back to the musings of Aristotle on other subjects. The book dwelt on unhappy marriages, and often on sicknesses of the mind or body, which affected the actions and decisions of Alexander and Aristotle.

I think that while the book was interesting, it felt very detached and indifferent in many places. I was annoyed because I thought that Aristotle behaved quite stupidly at points in the book, and while some of his writings and ideas can seem silly to the modern mind, he was a brilliant philosopher and an incredibly knowledgeable person. I like the way the author portrayed Alexander, but since I was reading the book through the first-person narrative of Aristotle, I never got to see or hear quite as much of their relationship as I wanted. I felt as though the author was constantly drawing my attention to certain details and my reaction to them was, "Yeah?" Which may be because I didn't get the book on the level I was supposed to, but there are many, including some among my book club, that admired and enjoyed it.

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## **Judy says**

This was just great. A novel about Aristotle during his years as tutor of a teenaged Alexander the Great. Annabel Lyon is yet another wonderful Canadian author.

Finishing *The Life of Greece* by Will Durant just two weeks prior was the best preparation for a good deep reading experience. After all, these two characters loomed large in Greek history and had far reaching effects throughout the ancient Greek world.

Durant gave his signature balanced account of political, philosophical and social life in *The Life of Greece*, but Annabel Lyon brought the lens in even closer by including close ups of the women. Aristotle's wife was a former concubine gifted to him by a Persian ruler. The first paragraph of Chapter One, the first sentence: "The rain falls in black cords, lashing my animals, my men, and my wife, Pythias, who last night lay with her legs spread while I took notes on the mouth of her sex."

Yes, first person. Aristotle tells the story from his scientific, philosophical Grecian mind. He married Pythias, he thirty-seven, she fifteen, and ravished her night after night. "I tried to make it up to her with kindness. I treated her with courtliness, gave her money, addressed her softly, spoke to her of my work." Alas, she is frigid but takes care of her husband with an insightful hand. He is prone to depression, a bit bipolar.

Alexander had close ties with his mother, who would have babied him into obscurity had it not been for his hard-fighting, ruthless father, King Philip of Macedon. Aristotle perceives the conflict laid in by the parents and does his best to prepare Alexander for the life ahead of him; to instill some wisdom and reasoning power as a balance to the young conqueror's intense physical energy and will to rule the world.

On it goes. Despite his intelligence and insatiable curiosity, the philosopher never quite achieved his dreams, which included teaching at Plato's school in Athens. But oh what exhilarating times he lived in, what out-sized historical figures he influenced!

Interesting that Mary Renault wrote *Fire From Heaven* (1969), a novel about Aristotle from Alexander's perspective. Now fifty years later Annabel Lyon turns the perspective around. I just love smart women.

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## **Richard Derus says**



Rating: 3.75\* of five

**The Publisher Says:** On the orders of his boyhood friend, now King Philip of Macedon, Aristotle postpones his dreams of succeeding Plato as leader of the Academy in Athens and reluctantly arrives in the Macedonian capital of Pella to tutor the king's adolescent sons. An early illness has left one son with the intellect of a child; the other is destined for greatness but struggles between a keen mind that craves instruction and the pressures of a society that demands his prowess as a soldier.

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**My Review:** I think this is up there in ambition of storytelling with *The Song of Achilles*, the five-star imaginative tour de force by Madeline Miller. Aristotle as narrator of his time spent in Pella? A good idea! Tutoring Alexander means getting to the heart of the legend that surrounds Alexander and vivifying him, dusting off the fustian and falderol accreted to his tale.

Here's Alexander speaking to Aristotle:

You who understand what a human mind can be, how can you bear it? I don't have the hundredth part of your mind and there are days when I think I'll go mad. I can feel it. Or hear it. It's more like hearing something creeping along the walls, just behind my head, getting closer and closer. A big insect, maybe a scorpion. A dry skittering, that's what madness sounds like to me.

Nice. Not a teenaged person speaking, and no I'm not retroactively applying 21st-century standards to Alexander, I'm fully aware that he was a powerful king's heir and a man before he was 17. But that's not my inner ear's problem with the passage.

It sounds like speechifying. It's not faux archaic, it's not arch or overwrought. It's just...speechy. Like a modern presidential speech to the jus' folks at a Town Hall. Aristotle, a man of immense intellect and

unbounded curiosity, attempts to instill those qualities in Alexander's still-forming mind:

You must look for the mean between extremes, the point of balance. The point will differ from man to man. There is not a universal standard of virtue to cover all situations at all times. Context must be taken into account, specificity, what is best at a particular place and time.

Aristotle uses some pretty vulgar (in all senses of the word) subjects to pique the youth's questing intelligence's appetite for information. (If Alexander was alive now, he'd be a Google employee assigned to counter-hacking.)

My father explained to me once that human male sperm was a potent distillation of all the fluids in the body, and that when those fluids became warm and agitated they produced foam, just as in cooking or sea water. The fluid or foam passes from the brain into the spine, and from there through the veins along the kidneys, then via the testicles into the penis. In the womb, the secretion of the man and the secretion of the woman are mixed together, though the man experiences the pleasure in the process and the woman does not. Even so, it is healthy for a woman to have regular intercourse, to keep the womb moist, and to warm the blood.

In the end, the historical Alexander and the historical Aristotle are brighter figures for Lyon's spit-polish of their statues. It's a good book, and I won't read it again. I feel it's delivered its payload of meaning and philosophical pondering to me. Alexander sums up the experience of *The Golden Mean* quite well:

You and I can appreciate the glory of things. We walk to the very edge of things as everyone else knows and understands and experiences them, and then we walk the next step. We go places no one has ever been. That's who we are. That's who you've taught me to be.

I can't begin to tell you how tough it was for me to finish this five-star idea and rate it under four stars. I can't honestly push it higher, for the reasons I've given. It might seem to others a perfect five, which rating I can't give but can see how a reader with a more accepting nature would.

Watch this writer. This is a debut novel, following a story collection and a novella collection as well as some YA work. There is nothing in this book, either structural or aesthetic, that suggests to me a career of mediocre ~meh~ness. Fine, imaginative writing will come forth from her pen. I haven't read the follow-on to this book, *The Sweet Girl*, about Aristotle's daughter. Happen that I will, with a deal of hope for excellence.

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## Mary says

Annabel Lyon's *The Golden Mean* is an audacious novel about Aristotle's tutoring of the hot-blooded young warrior Alexander the Great in the years before he becomes king of Macedon at age twenty. Aristotle's quirky, scientific view of life unfolds in language that is startlingly contemporary, both in the sense of modern and of rooted in 4th century BC. Lyon's prose jumps with life, takes risks, defies gravity. We know

we are in for a remarkable read when, early in the novel, we eavesdrop on Aristotle's thinking as he coolly examines his naked wife Pythias. A walking encyclopaedia who will write 200 books, we learn that Aristotle is prone to dramatic breakdowns that may reveal a tragic flaw. When young Alexander walks on stage holding a bloody severed head, the curtain of history is drawn back, the stage lights up, and we grip the edge of our seats.

*The Golden Mean* is a bravura performance by one of Canada's finest fiction writers. It was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller and the Governor-General's Award, and won the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for 2009. Lyon has a fascinating blog on historical subjects at <http://annabellyon.blogspot.com>

from <http://www.marynovik.com>

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## **Ben Babcock says**

Let me summarize this book for you.

**Aristotle:** Join me, Alexander. Feel the power of the Dark Side.

**Alexander:** Never!

**Aristotle:** Alexander, I AM YOUR FATHER.

**Alexander:** No!

**Aristotle:** Look within your heart, Alexander, which is actually a heart, and is not merely the shadow of an ideal heart, because how the hell did Plato think that would work anyway? You know it to be true.

**Alexander:** Noooooooooo!

**Aristotle:** \*chops off Alexander's hand with a light-sabre\*

—wait, no, sorry, that's *Star Wars*. Let's try this again.

**Aristotle:** Everything the light touches is your kingdom.

**Alexander:** Wow

**Aristotle:** A king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Alexander, the sun will set on Philip's time here, and will rise with you as the new king.

**Alexander:** What's that dark part over there?

**Aristotle:** That is Persia. We do not speak of it.

*Later, Aristotle gets trampled to death by wildebeest while Alexander looks on, and it is ALL HIS FAULT. Then his uncle becomes—*

—no, no, now that's *Lion King*. DAMN IT.

OK, don't worry, I got this.

**Aristotle:** If you'll just concede the necessity of going to school, we'll go on having conversations about leadership every night just as we always have. Is it a bargain?

**Alexander:** Yes, sir! *\*prepares to spit on his hand\**

**Aristotle:** We'll consider it sealed without the usual formality. Now about Boo Radley....

Nailed it.

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## **Roberta says**

A chronicle of Aristotle's seven years as Alexander of Macedon's tutor. The wild and warlike world of Macedon was not one Aristotle appreciated, even though he grew up there. He was more at home with the philosophers and debaters in Athens, although even there he kept his distance. When the opportunity presented, he couldn't pass up the chance to teach the young Alexander and ended up in the court at Macedonia.

What struck me the most about the story is how similar Aristotle and Alexander were. Their story is the search for the golden mean, the ideal balance between the life of action and the life of thought. They both seemed to suffer from blackouts. Aristotle's were the result of what seems to have been some form of bipolar disorder while Alexander's were a way of distancing himself from the violence around him. Along the way, I learned about Aristotle's notion of the ideal community and how bad it really is for a child to be raised as a warrior. The role played by Alexander's brother, who had either been poisoned as a child or had meningitis, was also interesting. He could aspire to neither extreme or to the mean itself. In the end, neither Aristotle nor Alexander is able to change his essential nature and they both become victims of their respective extremes.

Very well written and worth a second read someday.

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## **Lorina Stephens says**

While Annabel Lyon's much-acclaimed novel *The Golden Mean*, has been received well by critics, I'm afraid it fell short for this reader.

The novel deals with Aristotle's life during his tutelage of Alexander, who would become The Great. Lyon attempts to paint a picture of Aristotle's own struggle to find balance between depression and joy, passion and reason, and in doing so employs a considerable wealth of research into the historical characters.

However, research into the historical milieu is lacking. In the opening Lyon's describes:

*"I spent yesterday on the carts myself so I could write, though now I ride bareback, in the manner of my countrymen, a ball-busting proposition for someone who's been sedentary as long as I have."*

Agreed riding bare-back can be a painful experience over the long-term; however, the glaring inconsistency here is the fact Aristotle was writing while riding in a cart. In an era of no suspension, and roughly paved or even dirt roads, the jouncing and 'ball-busting' would have had his backside black and blue, and any writing would have been rendered illegible. Further, Lyon fails to illustrate that if paper (papyrus) were used, or more likely parchment or vellum, all would have required sanding and burnishing, tasks not easily accomplished on a bouncing, crashing cart. Moreover, use of any stylus and ink would have been prohibitive. If, however, a wax tablet had been used, which would have been more likely the case, even then any legible cipher would have been an impossibility.

The language of the novel was another point of contention for me. Altogether very modern, even to the use of the modern phrase, whapping each other upside the head, the language of the novel didn't ring true, and consequently a sense of time period and placement left me feeling disoriented. I wasn't looking for Shakespearean diction here; far from it. But I was looking for something a little less modern street.

Around the middle of the novel that modern touch became completely arresting when Lyons writes a scene wherein he and his wife watch snow falling, and Aristotle explains to his wife:

*"The gods don't send it," I say. "It's part of the machinery of the world. When the air is cold enough, rain turns to snow. It freezes. The water atoms attach to each other and harden."*

Now, while Democritus, one of the ancient Greek philosophers credited with the concept of atomic theory, was a contemporary of Aristotle's, the statement Lyon's writes reads just a bit too modern and stretches the boundaries of credibility.

As to the tone of the language, it is altogether very vulgar, which may be an attempt to reflect a male voice. Instead, at least for this reader, that vulgar tone simply rendered the novel somewhat adolescent and reliant on the use of shock factor instead of writing skill.

When analyzing writing skill, there is a profound lack of character development, so that Aristotle himself is merely a talking head, as are most of the enormous cast of characters. There's nothing there for me to hang on to. And that lack of character development extends to lack of environmental detail, so that what should have been a very alive, vibrant, sensory plunge into ancient Greece and Macedon, instead remain a grey slate waiting for colour. There was no sense of heat or cold, of architecture or furnishing, of environment or countryside. The only explicit detail Lyon ever uses is that of periodic, clinical gore, or base sexuality.

It may be that this sensory deprivation was Lyon's attempt to reflect the lack of depth and character in her protagonist, Aristotle, but for me it was like reading a green screen, waiting for the magic to appear.

If Lyon's novel, *The Golden Mean*, is the standard by which we now measure excellence, then I am outdated, antiquated and obsolete.

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## **Graham says**

I just finished reading *The Golden Mean* by Annabel Lyon, an historical novel about Aristotle torturing a young Alexander the Great. My overall impression was simply that it was a trite retelling of the same story. The dialogue at least is natural and believable, as much as anyone can suppose. It is strangely vulgar for no apparent effect. The characters curse awkwardly much like I would imagine the author to do: just to show that it can be done. In fact I would argue that among the characters in this book, the author only displays one if any of the four necessities claimed by Aristotle himself. Characters should be good, appropriate, realistic and consistent. Which brings me to my next point: if you are going to describe one of the greatest philosophers of all time, you must do more than state his themes. You must use and exemplify them. Clearly represented as a classical tragedy, this story lacks completely in hamartia. Aristotle would have described the plot as weak: missing reversal, recognition and suffering, if the reader be excluded. It's as if Ms. Lyon has never heard of *The Poetics*. We should all agree that tragedy is "a process of imitating an action which has serious implications." There is one clear theme, though it is oddly nestled into the text. The author presumes to lecture us on the importance of paternal leadership. Unfortunately for all parties involved, she misses her mark, clearly having no personal investment in the topic. She often questions the father figure and seems to confuse the roles while re-writing some kind of homosexual Oedipus Rex. In all it is a fine read for a paltry winter day or if you have a vested interest, but I would otherwise steer clear.

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## **Brett says**

Well, after trying to decide whether or not I wanted to read this book, I finally took the plunge after a bookstore owner highly recommended it. I had feared that the book - which tells of the relationship between Aristotle and Alexander (soon to be the Great) from Aristotle's point of view - might be dry and academic. That certainly was not the case. In very contemporary, muscular (there really isn't another word for it) prose, Annabel Lyon gives us a fascinating fictionalization of Alexander's boyhood under the tutoring of the great philosopher, Aristotle. Along the way we learn of Aristotle's own childhood, his losses, his education and his journey to marriage and fatherhood. While I didn't feel the book was 100% satisfying (not sure why - it felt incomplete: the book could have easily been twice as long without losing the reader), I do think that Lyon is a writer to watch. Her style is straightforward and yet at the same time descriptive. This book has been shortlisted for ALL of the major literary awards in Canada this year, and it's easy to see why. I cannot wait for her next book.

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## **Tamara Agha-Jaffar says**

*The Golden Mean* by Annabel Lyon is the story of the nearly seven years Aristotle spent as the tutor of Alexander, the son and heir of King Philip of Macedon. The narrative is told in Aristotle's voice, opening with his arrival in Pella, the capital of Macedon. He is accompanied by his wife, Pythias, and his nephew, Callisthenes.

Aristotle's initial task is to work with Philip's mentally challenged son, Arrhidaeus. Although he treats Arrhidaeus with compassion and helps him improve both his physical and mental agility, it is Arrhidaeus' younger brother, Alexander, who consumes Aristotle's interest and becomes the focus of his attention.

Aristotle is portrayed as highly intelligent and with an unbounded curiosity of the natural world, including human anatomy. Even though the novel is told from his point of view, he remains somewhat aloof and impenetrable. He is subject to fits of depression and has a tendency to weep he knows not why. His conversations occasionally sound stilted and have the flavor of a lecture-as if he were nothing more than a mouthpiece for his ideas.

Alexander emerges as an inquisitive, petulant, arrogant, lonely, willful, ambitious, and brilliant young man, capable of performing atrocities both on and off the battlefield that horrify even his father. Aristotle struggles to reign him in, to teach him the self-control required to live within the gold mean. Their conversations assume the form of verbal sparring-challenging each other back and forth as they debate ideas without arriving at mutually satisfactory resolutions.

Lyon guides us through a period of history replete with examples of male dominance. Her prose is muscular, straightforward, and, for the most part, engaging. However, her frequent use of obscenities and modern phrasing was jarring and incongruous. Such language yanks readers out of historical time and place and thrusts them smack in the middle of contemporary terminology and contemporary cuss words. Their presence is gratuitous, detracts from the setting, and diminishes what would otherwise have been a more enjoyable read.

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## **Jane says**

Fascinating interpretation of Alexander the Great; this time from the viewpoint of the philosopher, Aristotle, his teacher, who narrates. This gave a different slant to their story, and I enjoyed hearing Aristotle's voice. The author's portrayals of both characters was unusual: Alexander the Great was presented as very intense, curious but fixated on a few range of interests, maybe not selfish exactly, but perhaps suffering from Asperger's and most certainly emotionally damaged by his overbearing mother; Aristotle was presented as brilliant, but as he stated in the novel: suffering from "an excess of black bile", which I interpret to mean bipolar disorder, from his description of his moodswings.

Aristotle arrives with his wife and nephew in Pella, capital of Macedon and soon is engaged as the tutor of Alexander and Arrhidaeus, his mentally retarded elder brother. The novel describes his teaching of the princes. Besides philosophy, Aristotle demonstrates his knowledge of biology and medicine. [His father had been a physician]. The encouraging and bringing out Arrhidaeus' hidden qualities is done lovingly, so Arrhidaeus becomes more than a boy in a man's body. Alexander's first battles are described. Aristotle serves as a medic with the army for awhile. Finally, Philip is assassinated, Alexander becomes the ruler and goes forth to fulfil his destiny. Aristotle returns to his home town, destroyed in war but rebuilt.

The novel as a whole was well written, but the language was a bit raw for me at times and I was uneasy at the author's descriptions of sexual situations. I wish that could have been cut or at least toned down. Some of the depictions of Greek medicine were a bit gruesome for my taste: for instance, a caesarian birth and a trepanning of the skull. I didn't understand all the philosophy, but I liked the explanation of the "golden mean": balance between two extremes. Aristotle's illness could be a metaphor, for instance. The description of Plato's Academy in Athens was fascinating. The text of Aristotle's will was included. I read this quickly in an afternoon and evening. It read smoothly and I got a good feel for ancient Greece.

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## **Lilian Nattel says**

The Golden Mean by Annabel Lyon is terrific. I'll start with that and recommend that you go out and buy it.

This is a novel about Aristotle before he became Aristotle. He isn't a young man when the book begins. He is 37 years old and is inspecting his wife's vulva and vagina out of intellectual curiosity. His curiosity is great and he covets knowledge of all things.

The story follows his experiences for the next 7 years or so, while he is the tutor of Alexander the Great before he became the Great, still just the kid of King Philip of Macedon. The capital city, Pella, is a rough and tumble backwater. Aristotle longs for Athens, where he will, beginning in middle-age, found an academy and write the works that will influence science and thought for the next 1500 years or more.

The story is told in the first person and it's very much an interior journey. There is no overarching narrative, no through line of plot, but it held my interest throughout because it's so very well done. The voice of Aristotle, his thoughts, his feelings, his perspective and reminiscences are compelling. I know that this is one of the buzz words of blurbs (along with tour de force), but in this case the word is the right one. The historical period is brought vividly to life, not in external details, but through this perspective.

Aristotle is a nerd in a world of jocks, an intellectual among uncultured warriors whose king wants to put some shine on his court. Aristotle is both respected and mocked, seen as effeminate, and yet oddly valued. A king's friend, he is aware of his precarious position. He is a man of great mental powers and at the same time, a man of his period, shocked when his wife experiences sexual pleasure, not especially kind to women or slaves, but more considerate than some.

Of necessity, since ancient Greece restricted women's movements, especially upper class women, the story is mostly about men, but Lyon conveys the poignancy of this restriction effectively. One moment stands out for me especially, when Alexander's mother comes to visit him at school, and pays dearly for it because she is not supposed to leave her quarters. I also enjoyed the character and voice of the slave/midwife Athea.

(As an aside, I liked her so much I was thinking that if I was writing the book she would be my main character and then laughed at myself, because of course I did that in *The River Midnight*, albeit set in a later historical period.)

This must have been a hard book to bring to a conclusion because there isn't a narrative arc. There is no resolution, just another stage in the journey. I say this because my only quibble with this book, and it's a small one, is at the end. The last few pages are, like the rest, terrific. But just before that there is a conversation between Aristotle and Alexander that sums up their relationship, and I just couldn't picture it as real. But then it's over, the author returns to Aristotle's voice, which has been so--yes I'll say it again--compelling throughout. Aristotle leaves for Athens. He is about to become Aristotle.

Interior, first person stories are not my favourite form. It has to be well executed indeed to hold my interest, to impress and stay with me. *The Golden Mean* did.

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## Luís Castilho says

Annabel Lyon's "The Golden Mean" is an historic novel set in Macedon 342 BC about Aristotle's childhood spent helping his father in his very rudimentary medical practice and, later, as Plato's disciple. Aristotle's childhood story is interconnected with the account of his rise to fame as the tutor of the young macedonian prince Alexander (later known as Alexander the great). What could be a very interesting and schooling historic novel is, sadly, told in a very americanized fashion, filling the dialogue with slang words and common place phrases that seem unlikely to have come out of the historic character's mouths and, even sadder, filling the narrative with totally gratuitous sex scenes (much in HBO's narrative style). Even when Annabel Lyon finally begins to describe one of the many lessons given by Aristotle, the book fails to deliver the witty philosophical knowledge the reader is expecting. Furthermore, both Aristotle and Alexander characterization seems somewhat lacking in depth and vividness. Aristotle is not portrait as the great thinker he most probably was but instead as a very fragile and sexually frustrated man, in terrible need of the love and attention of everyone around him. Alexander, in turn, is very infantile and cruel child that quickly connects with Aristotle, for reasons the reader is unable to grasp, and is, at unexpected times, enlightened with deep thoughts (mainly in the presence of his tutor). It seems that Annabel Lyon's allegedly great historic research was not cleverly transferred to the book but was instead used as an excuse to publish yet another mediocre historic novel. All and all, a terrible book that should have been left unpublished.

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## Arielle says

Try as I might, my words cannot do justice to this fantastic novel. Set in ancient Greece, The Golden Mean gives a fictional-historical account of the life of the philosopher Aristotle and his tutelage of the young Prince Alexander of Macedon (later, Alexander the Great). Out of all of the historical novels I have read, The Golden Mean is the best proof that historical novels can be just as engaging, alive and colourful as a novel with fictional characters and settings. Here, ancient Greece is not romanticized, but feels rough and visceral, and the characters are set upon a background that is bursting with evidence of Lyon's research. I learned so much about the culture of ancient Greece from this novel, but without feeling like I was in a classroom, taking notes.

As a character, Aristotle is fascinating. From all that has been written about him, he seems like a very daunting choice for a main character--especially one that tells the story in first person--but Lyon does a wonderful job of peeling back the layer of mystery that will always proceed Aristotle (and Alexander) and examining the mind behind the name. Part philosopher, part scientist, Aristotle seems to simultaneously transcend his own time and be entrenched in it. Like his tutor Plato, he has an imagination that extends beyond the physical realm, but also focuses a lot of his energy on revealing the secrets of physical bodies and minds. The many depictions of early medicine and surgical practices in this book were particularly interesting to me (though fairly gruesome) as well as discussions of mental illness. I should note that this novel doesn't focus so much on the work of Aristotle, but rather the mindset and circumstances that may have led to his writings and his influence on the court of Macedonia. However, it has inspired me to read more historical texts about the lives and achievements of both Aristotle and Alexander the Great.

Overall, The Golden Mean is a beautiful and haunting novel that is at times poignant and bitterly humorous. I highly recommend it, and will be on the look out for any upcoming novels from Lyon.

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## **Rick says**

"I accept that the greatest happiness comes to those capable of the highest things ... That's where you and I walk away from the rest of the world. You and I can appreciate the glory of things. We walk to the very edge of things as everyone else knows and understands and experiences them, and then we walk the next step. We go places no one has ever been. That's who we are. That's who you've taught me to be." – Alexander, to Aristotle (pg. 275)

The Golden Mean is a graceful re-imagining of one of history's most fascinating relationships—that between the legendary philosopher Aristotle and his most famous pupil, Alexander the Great. Lyon writes clearly, sometimes beautifully, and the book is an absolute pleasure to read. It's a stunningly accomplished work from a first-time novelist.

In 343 BCE, King Philip II of Macedon engaged the philosopher Aristotle as tutor for his 13-year-old son. Philip, who was well on his way to taking control of the entire Greek peninsula, and had his eyes on the Persian Empire, had already taken care to have Alexander schooled in the arts of war. But wishing to temper warrior passions with the influence of philosophy and the arts, he turned to the celebrated philosopher, a former playmate from his own boyhood.

Aristotle is initially reluctant to set aside his own ambitions in Athens in order to tutor the rebellious future king of the world. But the philosopher soon realizes that teaching this charming, yet mercurial teenager is a necessity amid the ever more sinister intrigues of Philip's court. But as Alexander grows older and seems destined to transform the world for better or for worse, Aristotle's lessons may be all that stands between a benevolent king and a hungry conqueror.

The underlying theme of the novel, as asserted in its title, is Aristotle's quest to find the "golden mean" within Alexander. The golden mean is that desirable middle between extremes, the perfect equilibrium between excess and insufficiency. In Alexander's case, the stable center between war and academia, the physical and the mental, arrogance and humility.

"You must look for the mean between extremes, the point of balance. The point will differ from man to man. There is not a universal standard of virtue to cover all situations at all times. Context must be taken into account, specificity, what is best at a particular place and time." (pg. 188)

Aristotle's relationship with Alexander is a complex one. They have great affection for one another, yet they're often at great odds. It's a classic tale of youthful exuberance chafing against the wisdom of age. Their honest and direct conversations surrounding their differing viewpoints are some of the best exchanges in the book. Truly, there just weren't enough of them.

The Golden Mean is that rare example of a book that is too laconic for its own good. While it's a lesson in economy, this story of Aristotle and Alexander had so much more to give. Every interaction between these two historical heavyweights bristles with vim and vigor; there is a potency and significance to the relationship that hasn't been seen very often in the history of the entire world. I found myself lusting after each discussion, lesson, and argument.

The Golden Mean could have easily been twice as long (easily!) without suffering from verbosity. Aristotle spends seven years as Alexander's tutor, a period that shapes the boy into the philosophic conqueror who sought to unite the entire world. To focus on the golden mean, and this only, is too limited a portrayal. But

it's clear that Lyon only sought to tell this part of the tale, so it's perhaps unfair to want for things she had no intention of portraying.

Through Aristotle, we modern readers are able to see the world through primitive eyes. One in which house slaves are the norm, death is swift and common, and life is altogether more dramatic and challenging. And this is perhaps where the novel succeeds best. I was fascinated by Aristotle's explanations for natural phenomena that are completely wrong (as we understand them today) but were the starting point for rational inquiry that would eventually lead to modern science.

This is a testament to the honesty of Lyon's story, her no-holds-barred portrayal of both Aristotle and Alexander; one, a seemingly bi-polar instructor perhaps too resolute and steadfast in his own proficiencies, the other, a brilliant but arrogant student prone to both fawning and petulance. Neither of these men are perfect. They are, in truth, far from it. But their ability to recognize (and control) their own hubris is what allowed them to achieve greatness.

Despite having no discernible thrust to the story, *The Golden Mean* is a literary page-turner. At times meandering, at others out of focus, the novel overcomes these slight flaws to become an extremely entertaining and enlightening historical fiction. The worst I can say about it is that it simply didn't have enough of what was there. Lyon, choosing the mean between the extremes of verbosity and economy, may have done herself a disservice.

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## **Lata says**

2.5 stars.

I bought this book many years ago, then stuck it on a shelf and forgot it. Every now and again, I would look at it on the shelf, then choose something else to read. Jo Walton got me to pick this book up and finally read it. No, I don't know Jo Walton, but I finished reading her Thessaly series, and those books reminded me I had this.

So, preamble out of the way, what did I think of this?...The blurbs on the cover made me think I was holding the work of THE Canadian novelist, comparing Annabel Lyon to Alice Munro. I'm not sure I'd agree with that comparison, but I do think she's a good writer.

The book describes the years Aristotle spent tutoring young Alexander (that conqueror guy) before returning to Athens. I knew nothing about that period in history, other than Alexander later went on to much (short-lived) success.

The book's opening sentence let me know I wasn't in for pretty, philosophical speeches. There is an earthiness to the story, featuring blood, sex, knives, plotting, masculinity and its blindness and cost.

The story is told from Aristotle's perspective. He seemed happiest investigating natural phenomena and writing about his findings, instead of interacting with others.

The Alexander we meet is young and needing some guidance and teaching; he's also seen as a bit strange by some.; this strangeness is explored a little in the book. Lyons shows us examples of Alexander's curiosity, strength, and loneliness. She also shows us a little of what the other characters find frightening in Alexander.

I found for all that we're in Aristotle's head for the entire book, I didn't get a good feel for him. He seemed proud, arrogant and superior (I found him to be a bit of a knob, at times.)

Women don't figure prominently in this book, as this story is about masculine relationships. We only get to spend a little time with Pythias, Aristotle's wife, and we see her through him: them having sex, her keeping a comfortable home for him, him talking to and at her. I wanted to see much more of her.

I would not say this is a great book. I'm still on the fence about whether this is a good book. The writing was good, and clever in parts, but I didn't find myself racing through this book, desperate to find out what happens next. I'd say it was interesting, and a little slow going.

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