

## **The Desert and the City By Derek Bickerton**

**2009: Eloquent Books, New York. 279 pages.**

The book is set in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century CE in Egypt in a Christian colony at Scetis in the Wadi Natrun. The first chapter starts with a young Greek lad from Alexandria who wants to become a hermit. He walks for over twenty hours across the desert to the colony, to be greeted by the Hermit Moses, a reformed bandit, who introduces him to his desert world. I have a few problems with believing this aspect of the story as this is a community of Hermits, who eat, worship, and travel together. My understanding of the term hermit (and indeed that of the Oxford Dictionary) is that of an individual who has withdrawn from life to live in solitude; this doesn't sit within the organised community with a "head hermit" providing training to his disciples on how to be a hermit. However some of the characters in the book, specifically Macarius were real people from the area where a monastery stood, and the community of "hermits" described here is more in line with monks and a monastery than eremitic life which often resulted in the bishop of the region bricking up the entrance to their cells once they entered preventing them from leaving and aiding with their endeavours. None of this is represented in the story.

Zachary does not take to the life straight away and spends the first day in his cell, with his mind wandering back to the delicious food he once consumed at a wedding. As time progresses although adapting to the monotony of life as a "hermit", he is tormented by memories of his life in Alexandria, even when he gets a new mentor, who is strict and believes in obedience from his disciples, and it becomes apparent his sojourn into the desert was the result of having his heart broken by Celia, a woman from his past life in Alexandria; who is to also prove to ruin his new found life of abstinence.

The first half of the book sets the scene regarding the group of hermits (perhaps colony is a better term) and their lifestyle, following them through their adventures through the desert and on trips to the nearest Delta city of Terenuthis which seem to be action-packed with robbers, bandits and prostitutes. Who knew the life of the hermit could involve such colourful people! Some of the events I found a little far-fetched for a community of hermits who had "shunned" society but they were enjoyable to read and added a little bit of excitement to the story. This novel is easy to read, and the text and dialogue flow well, although the story was a little slow to get going. By page 109 of 279 pages I was wondering when something was going to happen which would give the story some purpose; it was only on page 180 that the action began. I believe this is because this is the first of a trilogy of books and this one is scene setting.

The main action of the story is a trip to Alexandria on a violent campaign against the pagan worshippers who had barricaded themselves from the rampaging Christians in the Serapeum. The leader of the Christian church in Alexandria, Theophilus had rallied the hermits to march with him against the pagans, resulting in the death of

hundreds of people and the destruction of the remainder of the library of Alexandria. Zachary joined this army of Christian holy men and is disturbed by the actions of his fellow Christians, and ends up in a bar with his "brother" Benjamin. This evening of debauchery deeply troubles Zachary and he is very concerned for his soul; which was only to get worse once he comes face to face with the reason for his retreat from the world, Celia. What happens to Zachary after his departure from her home is not described and we leave him in a very sorry state; and no doubt his future will be revealed in volume two of the trilogy.

There are numerous discrepancies in the language and terminology throughout the novel, which does not sit well with the time period; for example "he raced swiftly through the immense card-index in his head" and "unaware that sixteen centuries later one would find itself on the Thames embankment and the other in Central Park"; the latter of which holds no relevance to the story and seems to be an attempt at context. However these can be over-looked and the story is an enjoyable read with some interesting characters with noble personalities. Although not much happens in the story on the whole it is well-written and you get some affinity for the characters and the end of the book left me wondering what young Zachary will do to overcome his guilt and torment after the events in Alexandria. I guess I have to read the next one to find out. I have rated this 7-8 as it is a good, a mostly-accurate historical novel (language used aside) covering a time period and group of people as the setting which is normally ignored. An interesting choice.