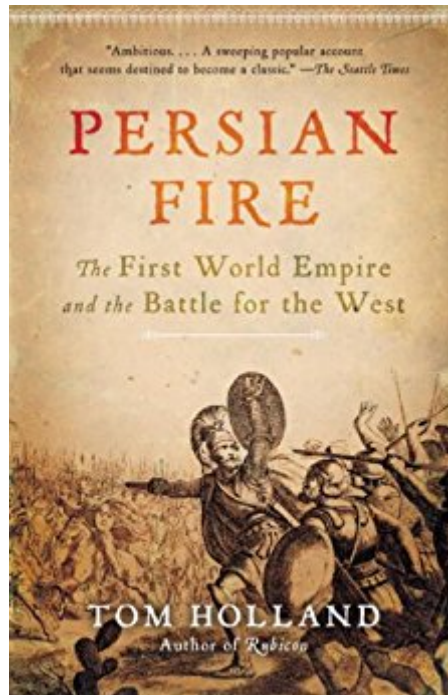




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Persian Fire



Synopsis

In the fifth century B.C., a global superpower was determined to bring truth and order to what it regarded as two terrorist states. The superpower was Persia, incomparably rich in ambition, gold, and men. The terrorist states were Athens and Sparta, eccentric cities in a poor and mountainous backwater: Greece. The story of how their citizens took on the Great King of Persia, and thereby saved not only themselves but Western civilization as well, is as heart-stopping and fateful as any episode in history. Tom Holland's brilliant study of these critical Persian Wars skillfully examines a conflict of critical importance to both ancient and modern history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This very readable popular history of the 5th-century BC Persian Wars with Greece combines careful historical detective work with a sometimes breezy tone. I enjoyed this book probably about as much as I enjoyed Holland's "Rubicon"--which is to say, quite a lot. It is solid, credibly researched history as it might be presented by a tabloid journalist: cynical, gossipy, and salted liberally with salacious or incriminating nuggets about its many characters. It is intended for a general audience, not an academic one, and it succeeds very well. The book has an unusual but well-considered structure. Holland starts off by describing the societies of the protagonists, devoting his opening

chapters to Mesopotamia, Iran, Sparta, and Athens. He does an excellent job of showing how different these worlds were from each other, and gives a strong flavor of how their inhabitants thought and behaved. That done, Holland moves on to the wars themselves, with accounts of the campaigns leading to the famous battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis, which we are now in a position to appreciate much better, knowing something of the outlook and worldview of the different players. Holland's drive to tell a seamless story has him solving all kinds of problems of conflicts in the sources, drawing canny conclusions from wispy or contradictory data. Only occasionally does he draw attention to his reasoning; mostly it is part of the work underlying the flow of his story. And his story does flow. Sometimes I found that Holland had laid the cynicism on a bit thick. While of course the ancient world, including among its heroes, had its share of scheming, selfish, greedy, backstabbing blowhards, some of the people must have exhibited more noble qualities at least sometimes.

In his excellent 2003 book, RUBICON, Tom Holland showed that he has a unique ability to take a highly complex situation in ancient history (in Rubicon's case, the career of Julius Caesar and the death of the Roman Republic) and make it not only clear and credible to the well-read history buff, but understandable to the reader who knows nothing about ancient history. RUBICON was a well-balanced history that read with the drama of a novel. After its well-praised reception, Holland turned to his latest book, PERSIAN FIRE, in which he trains his academic mind on the equally dramatic Greek drama of the Persian invasions in the late fifth century - an invasion pregnant with implications for the rise of a democratic Athens as well as its eventual fall. Like RUBICON, Holland's classical background makes him a natural to explain the peculiarly complicated relationship between Darius and Xerxes, the Persian Emperors who cast hungry eyes at the west; their two invasions, and the eventual triumph of the unified Greeks after many hair-raising challenges.

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