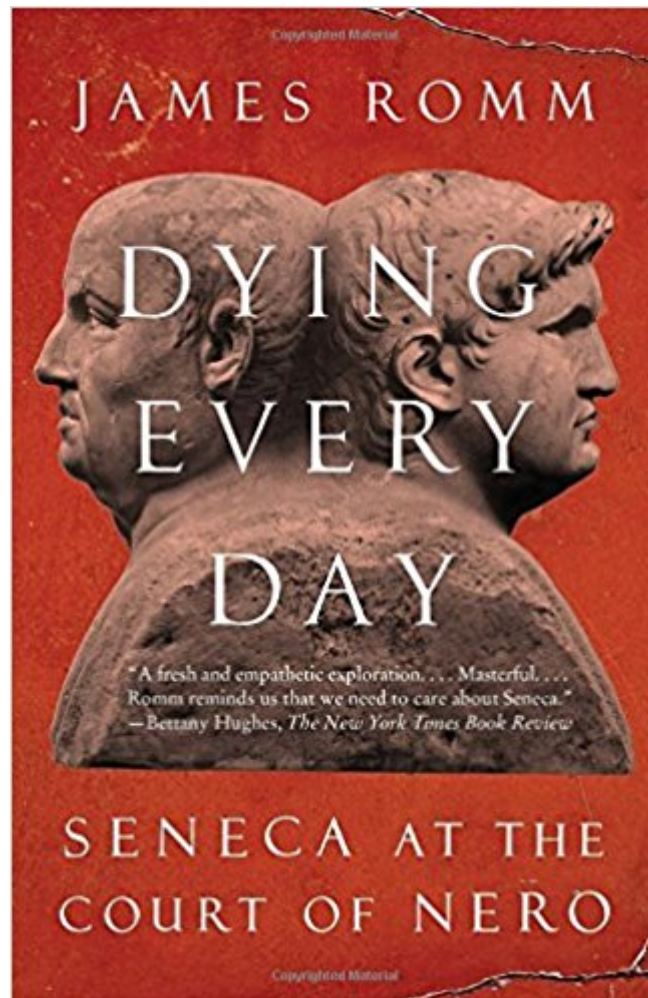




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Dying Every Day: Seneca At The Court Of Nero



Synopsis

From acclaimed classical historian, author of *Ghost on the Throne* a high-stakes drama full of murder, madness, tyranny, perversion, with the sweep of history on the grand scale. At the center, the tumultuous life of Seneca, ancient Rome's preeminent writer and philosopher, beginning with banishment in his fifties and subsequent appointment as tutor to twelve-year-old Nero, future emperor of Rome. Controlling them both, Nero's mother, Julia Agrippina the Younger, Roman empress, great-granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus, sister of the Emperor Caligula, niece and fourth wife of Emperor Claudius. James Romm seamlessly weaves together the life and written words, the moral struggles, political intrigue, and bloody vengeance that enmeshed Seneca the Younger in the twisted imperial family and the perverse, paranoid regime of Emperor Nero, despot and madman. Romm writes that Seneca watched over Nero as teacher, moral guide, and surrogate father, and, at seventeen, when Nero abruptly ascended to become emperor of Rome, Seneca, a man never avid for political power became, with Nero, the ruler of the Roman Empire. We see how Seneca was able to control his young student, how, under Seneca's influence, Nero ruled with intelligence and moderation, banned capital punishment, reduced taxes, gave slaves the right to file complaints against their owners, pardoned prisoners arrested for sedition. But with time, as Nero grew vain and disillusioned, Seneca was unable to hold sway over the emperor, and between Nero's mother, Agrippina "thought to have poisoned her second husband, and her third, who was her uncle (Claudius), and rumored to have entered into an incestuous relationship with her son" and Nero's father, described by Suetonius as a murderer and cheat charged with treason, adultery, and incest, how long could the young Nero have been contained? *Dying Every Day* is a portrait of Seneca's moral struggle in the midst of madness and excess. In his treatises, Seneca preached a rigorous ethical creed, exalting heroes who defied danger to do what was right or embrace a noble death. As Nero's adviser, Seneca was presented with a more complex set of choices, as the only man capable of summoning the better aspect of Nero's nature, yet, remaining at Nero's side and colluding in the evil regime he created. *Dying Every Day* is the first book to tell the compelling and nightmarish story of the philosopher-poet who was almost a king, tied to a tyrant "as Seneca, the paragon of reason, watched his student spiral into madness and whose descent saw five family murders, the Fire of Rome, and a savage purge that destroyed the supreme minds of the Senate's golden age.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Vintage; First Edition edition (December 2, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307743748

ISBN-13: 978-0307743749

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 86 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #312,215 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #97 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Rome #194 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Philosophers #503 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Rome

Customer Reviews

Was Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger an exemplar of Stoic virtue who, pulled into politics in the service of Emperor Nero, did his best to modulate the young despot's cruelty? Or was he a shrewd manipulator whose ethical treatises were just a cynical attempt to restore a reputation sullied by his complicity in Nero's cruel and decadent court? Tacitus, who wrote a lot about Seneca, seems to have had trouble making up his mind. Romm suggests that we might bring together these conflicting portraits by understanding Seneca as a serious thinker who suffered from passivity and obsequiousness, and had the misfortune to live at a time when intellectual activity had become particularly dangerous. Seneca's elegant humanistic vision (which would influence, among other things, Roman Catholic church doctrine), therefore, was not fraudulent, but aspirational, and somewhat tragic: ideals articulated by a flawed man who was all too aware of his inability to live up to them. Vividly describing the intensity of political life in the Nero years, and paying particular attention to the Roman fascination with suicide, Romm's narrative is gripping, erudite, and occasionally quite grim. --Brendan Driscoll --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Praise for James Romm's *DYING EVERY DAY* "Romm adeptly expounds the puzzle of Seneca's life." "The New Yorker" "James Romm stitches this tapestry of evil together with a practiced hand." "Buffalo News" "A splendid and incisive historical page-turner. . . . This is how history should be written: vivid storytelling springing to life at a master's touch. . . . Romm's narrative proves so compelling precisely because he concentrates on character,

combining erudite scholarship with a novelist's flair for telling detail. The result becomes an exception to the rule: When exercised with wisdom, dexterity and fervor, literary power shines as incorruptible.

• "Wichita Eagle" "Thoroughly engaging and fascinating. . . . A high-stakes drama, laced with murders, madness, and despotism. . . . The highlight of the spring season."

• "Hudson Valley News" "Romm's compulsively readable account of imperial intrigues (incest, murder, suicide) brings contradictory visions of Seneca into three-dimensional focus."

• "Chronogram" "Romm's approach combines the commonly known with the fascinating, but more obscure. He makes a sustained point of showing Seneca as neither black nor white, neither totally deserving of his fate, nor so noble that all charges should drip off his well-oiled back. He shows different sides to the emperors as well and puts the women of the Caesars into their well-deserved positions of prominence. . . . The fact that Romm presents the Stoic philosopher in this novel complex light and that he shows sides of the more famous that aren't common knowledge leaves me feeling [like] I got an awful lot out of reading it."

Have I mentioned, I really, really liked this book?

• "N. S. Gill, About.com" "Historians from Seneca's contemporaries through the present day have puzzled over his true character. Ascetic Stoic moralist or conniving courtier? Romm doesn't claim to settle the centuries-old mystery, but sheds light using ancient sources and occasional references to modern critics, joining his readers in marveling at a regime remembered by history for its shocking excesses."

• "Julia Jenkins, Shelf Awareness (Starred Review)" "Extensively researched." A book that will be welcomed by both scholars and those with a more casual interest in history. In addition and most important to our time is the detailed study of power politics and the inevitable consequences of weakness and corruption allowing power to be concentrated into few hands

| An engrossing account of a time when rational thought was set aside in favor of passion and when good men cowed in the face of tyranny and did nothing to stem it.

• "New York Journal of Books"

This is a superb but a somewhat complex book. It is both a biography of Seneca and a history of the terrible reign of Emperor Nero. This is entirely unsurprising given the essential role played by Seneca in both the education and the reign of the murderous young Emperor and because it is simply impossible to understand the ambivalence of the former without putting him and his works into context. The complexity lies in trying to understand who Seneca really was, or, to be more precise, to understand his ambivalence and ambiguity. Simply put, the philosopher high and lofty moral principles were simply at odds with many of his actions and with the support he gave and the role he played at the Court of Nero. Seneca essentially strived "and ultimately failed"

to keep the Emperor from his worst excesses. However, he was also, as the author clearly shows one of the main moral cautions of the regime and he was, to a large extent, used and abused by his protégé, pupil and master. It is this ambivalence, and Seneca's ultimate failure which he paid with his life, which are striking, hard to explain and tragic. It is also this ambivalence and these gaps between the moral high ground that Seneca wanted to claim and his much less attractive actions that largely make him into an enigma and into a controversial character. He has been portrayed as both an accomplice of Nero and one of his victims and in fact he was both, as James Romm shows so skilfully. James Romm also shows how Seneca managed to put himself into such a position. He was ambitious. He liked money and power, as the vast majority of Roman senators, and this tended to clash with his stoic principles. He also seems to have had a rather high opinion of himself and also managed to deceive himself, believing that he could effectively restrain and influence Nero and become the power behind the throne. As the author also shows, Seneca was well aware of having compromised - and not lived up to - his high principles. He was also aware of having become the accomplice, the moral caution and even the virtual prisoner and hostage of his ex-pupil, an increasingly unstable, paranoid and murderous Emperor. It is this, and the fact that his beloved nephew Lucan was also increasingly a quasi-hostage at Nero's court that explains this book's title "Dying every day" - a quotation from one of Seneca's works. The book's construction gives the impression of a slow descent to Hell and chaos, reinforcing the story told by the narrative. After "Suicide", a theme dear to the Stoics, come "Regicide", the poisoning of Emperor Claudius, and "Fratricide", the murder of Britannicus by Nero, to prevent Agrippina from using him against her own son. At the very least, Seneca was aware of it and he did nothing to prevent it. This is followed by "Matricide", Agrippina's murder on the orders of her son, with the author showing rather well how formidable, unscrupulous and power-hungry the last surviving child of Germanicus was, and how dangerous she could be for Nero when he started to side line her. This was followed by "Mariticide", Nero's elimination of his wife Octavia, an act which further tarnished his reputation, and by "Holocaust", the great fire of Rome during which about two-thirds of the city was destroyed. "Suicide", the last but one chapter tells the story of the half-backed Piso conspiracy in which Seneca was compromised, although he did not take part directly, and its unsurprising failure. It is this compromising "his nephew Lucan was part of it and would pay it with his life" that lead to Seneca's suicide. The last chapter ("Euthanasia") tells the story of the end of Nero's reign, as opposition mounts against him after three more years of excess and lead to his own

suicide, and to a bitter but short civil war. A masterful book which is fascinating, full of insights and paints rather well the suffocating atmosphere that one could breathe at Nero's Court, and the barely concealed terror that courtiers must have felt at the mercy of an increasingly unbalanced Emperor. This one is easily worth five strong stars and a book that I strongly recommend for all fans of the Roman Principate.

This is a difficult review to write because I was fairly ambivalent toward this book after reading it. The introduction sets up the story well. Romm presents two different interpretations of Seneca - that of the wise sage caught up in the tragedy of Nero and stoic philosopher poser who allied himself to Nero in exchange for money and power. For the next 150 pages or so we have a fairly engaging history. Pauses are made here and there to compare the historical situation with the writings of Seneca. It seems like a great idea and one that should elucidate the events. However, we discover that almost nothing is known about the dating of Seneca's writings and so we cannot correlate the two. This is why my feelings about this book are mixed. I respect Romm for being a careful historian and not being overly speculative. It would have been tempting to create a link to make the narrative more interesting, but Romm continually resists doing so. In the end, I felt I learned a lot about the time period. The reign of Nero is certainly a fascinating tale of hubris and Romm tells the story well. With any biography I want to understand the subject when I am finished. I know more about Seneca, but I do not feel I understood Seneca any better after reading this work. In the end the issue of the dual portrait of Seneca set up so well in the introduction lies unresolved. However, this is not Romm's fault as much as it is the limitation of our sources. In a way "Dying Every Day" fails as a biography and also fails to answer the question it asks, I do not find it a failure as history.

Nero, what's not to hate? He makes a comic book villain look tame by comparison. In a half a lifetime Nero managed to destroy and bankrupt the Augustus bloodline, murder his mother, wife & son, brother, cousin, Christians, friends, enemies, and just about anyone else who crossed his path. But, this story is about Seneca, who managed to survive Claudius and rise to amazing heights in the Roman empire - even precepts were barely in his grasp according to some. Seneca owes Agrippina for his rise to prominence as the teacher / philosopher / statesman to Nero. Such a deep influence Agrippina was to Nero cannot be overlooked. She, like the rest of her bloodline, was never shy of poison, intrigue, even using incest to get and keep control. At first she brought Seneca out of exile as a way of using his gratitude to influence her son. The biggest problem for Seneca, and any Roman of that or any time is that biting the hand that feeds you can be deadly. As Romm lists and

comments on the major works of Seneca, each served a purpose that promoted Seneca in his political ambitions, yet all the while cementing his reputation as a stoic philosopher. So, what I observed was Seneca watering down Seneca. He could not speak plainly about the horrific abuses that mounted as time went on, so he used flattery, praise, and allusion to make his points. The older Nero got, the more dissolute he became. Murdering Britannicus openly, in front of his meddling and controlling mother, seemed too easy. Eventually, she had to go also, and Seneca was witness to it all. Realizing that Nero was just another petulant thug, who enjoyed singing and playing the harp with little regard to the tremendous amount of money Rome was hemorrhaging, Seneca knew it was now impossible to leave. The fact that Nero only outlived Seneca by a few short years may satisfy some, but it was a tragedy to never really know what Seneca could have been capable of had his influence continued. This is an excellent book that draws the reader into the strange world of Rome's most recognizable tyrant and how good and honorable men are drawn in and made hostage by their own indulgence.

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