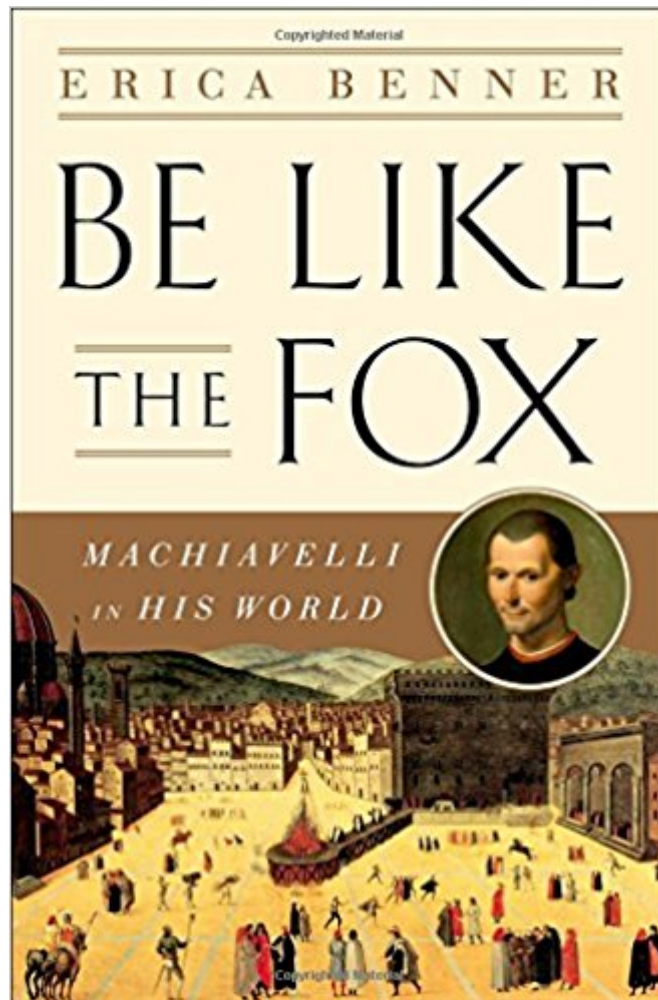




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# Be Like The Fox: Machiavelli In His World



## Synopsis

The dramatic, myth-shattering story of how Machiavelli – arguably the most misunderstood thinker of all time – fought to change his corrupt world. Since the publication of *The Prince* five centuries ago, Machiavelli has been associated with political amorality. But that characterization is unfair. In *Be Like the Fox*, Erica Benner sets the record straight: far from the ruthless “Machiavellian” henchman that people think he was, Machiavelli emerges here as a profound ethical thinker who fought to uphold high moral standards and restore the democratic freedoms of his beloved Florence. Shaking the dust from history, Benner masterfully interweaves Machiavelli’s words with those of his friends and enemies, giving us a biography with all the energy of fiction. Through dialogues and diaries, we witness dramatic episodes, including Savonarola’s fiery sermons against the elite in Florence’s piazza, Machiavelli’s secret negotiations with Caterina Sforza at the court of Forlì, and the Florentines’ frantic preparations to resist Pope Julius’s plan to over-throw their Republic. Benner relates how Machiavelli rose as an advisor in the Florentine Republic, advancing the city’s interests as a diplomat and military strategist, only to become a political pariah when the Republic was defeated. His egalitarian politics made him an enemy of the Medici family, and his secular outlook put him at odds with religious zealots. But he soon learned to mask his true convictions, becoming a great artist of foxlike dissimulation. Machiavelli’s masterpiece, *The Prince*, was in fact a critique of princely power, but the critique had to be veiled, written as it was after the Medici triumphed over the Republic. In *Be Like the Fox*, the most accurate and compelling portrait of Machiavelli yet, Benner recounts the gripping story of a brilliant political thinker, showing that Machiavelli’s ideas about democratic institutions, diplomacy, and freedom are more important than ever.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 384 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (May 9, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393609723

ISBN-13: 978-0393609721

Product Dimensions: 6.6 x 1.2 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #72,580 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #35 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Philosophers #57 in Books > History > Europe > Italy #65 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Humanism

## Customer Reviews

“Erudite and engaging. . . Be Like the Fox” is not detached, archival history but a remarkable work of imaginative engagement backed by scholarly learning. Benner brings Machiavelli alive by weaving his words and those of his contemporaries into the narrative as a playwright might. . . Be Like the Fox” can be read with pleasure by anyone interested in the craft of politics and the life of ideas. — Edmund Fawcett, New York Times Book Review

“Lively, unshowily erudite, compulsively readable.” — Terry Eagleton, The Guardian

“In this tightly composed narrative of Machiavelli’s life and works, Benner argues that *The Prince* is a work of secret subversion, using irony and beguilement to advance a staunchly republican message. . . [A] gripping portrait of a brilliant political thinker, who understood the dangers of authoritarianism and looked for ways to curb them even though independent speech had become impossible.” — The New Yorker

“Unconventional. . . Benner argues that in [his] turbulent, violent world, Machiavelli’s most consistent advice favoured principle, restraint and respect for the rule of law, even in *The Prince*. . . Compelling.” — Julian Baggini, Financial Times

“Engaging, entertaining, splendidly colourful. . . Brings to life a Machiavelli who’s a man of considerable political principle. Benner does a wonderful job of bringing to life Florentine society — the world of the piazzas, the courts, the battlefields. . . A creative, very readable book with more than a little contemporary resonance.” — Catherine Fletcher, Literary Review (UK)

“A ripping read. . . fascinating, charming, enjoyably unorthodox.” — Tim Smith-Laing, The Telegraph (UK)

“Erica Benner succeeds brilliantly in overturning centuries-old received views of a seminal but misunderstood writer and thinker. Her enthralling and moving evocation of Machiavelli’s turbulent career, set in the milieu in which he lived, also reveals how much he is our contemporary.” — Rosamund Bartlett, author of *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*

“Erica Benner’s compelling book testifies to the eternal return of Machiavelli’s puzzle: whether he was the voice of Satan, or the author who wanted to put morality on firmer human foundations by unveiling the empty moral platitudes that politicians used to shroud their foxy and ruthless behavior. Like a riveting novel, Benner’s book guides us through Machiavelli’s times and shows the variety of masks he put on, suggesting that the

man behind them was less likely to compromise than his words might lead us to believe.

— Nadia Urbinati, author of *Democracy Disfigured* and professor of political science, Columbia University

“No other writer about Machiavelli approaches the liveliness of Erica Benner. In *Be Like the Fox* she boldly confronts the most daunting obstacle to interpreting him: that being himself so foxy he rarely means quite what he writes. Drawing on his life and all his varied writings and inter-weaving these with the turbulent life of Florence in his day, she retrieves a Machiavelli who is not the promoter of crookedness but its critic, a friend of democracy and honest government whose heart is with the underdog.

— Clifford Orwin, professor of political science, classics, and Jewish studies, Toronto University

“In Erica Benner’s *Be Like the Fox*, Machiavelli—in his own words the historian, the comic writer, the tragic author—comes alive as the master of irony deployed in the service of justice, civic morality and the rule of law. This delightful and convincing account should be the final nail in the coffin of the derogatory term ‘Machiavellian.’

— Samuel Bowles, author of *The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens*

“Is there anything more to say about Machiavelli’s *Prince* after more than five hundred years? Well, yes. Erica Benner beautifully embeds Machiavelli’s most famous book within the Florentine politics of his time. More than any other book known to me, this one genuinely illuminates the humanity of Machiavelli.

— Steven B. Smith, Alfred Cowles Professor of Political Science, Yale University

“Fascinating, remarkable. . . . Erica Benner illuminates not only the life of Machiavelli but the complex and cruel political world in which he operated.

— Avi Shlaim

Erica Benner lives in Berlin. She is the author of several books, including *Machiavelli’s Ethics* and *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading*. Formerly a Fellow at Yale University, Benner taught for many years at Oxford University and the London School of Economics.

This book gives a new perspective on the Machiavelli’s character and oeuvre, and a view into the politics and corruption of the Florentine world he lived in. It is a fascinating read, and very rewarding.

At last an in depth exploration of *The Prince* and Machiavelli that sees the irony in *The Prince*.

This book looked so good I had to use some friends in the publishing industry to get access to an early copy. It’s essentially a combination bio and explanation of Machiavelli’s work, not unlike the wonderful *How to Live* was a biography and reader for Montaigne. The problem is most people think

they have read and understood Machiavelli--but they haven't. They use the word Machiavellian, but they miss that Machiavelli was actually captured and tortured for plotting against the Medici's--to restore Florence to a Republic. The international subtitle to *Be Like the Fox* internationally is "Machiavelli's Lifelong Quest for Freedom" which I think is superior. This book is a little long and occasionally confusing (the quotes are italicized instead of being put between "") but otherwise is very good. I took extensive notes. For a deeper dive into Machiavelli by the same author, I suggest *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* which I also read.

This is a gripping, wonderfully insightful book about a man who fought hard to save his republic and helps us think about how to save ours. It is both a fascinating and dramatic "life and times" of Machiavelli and a study of how republics get corrupted and fall apart. There are lots of superb Machiavelli quotes woven into the story, and many of them relate very well to politics in the present. Machiavelli comes across as a hilarious and creative guy who wrote poems and satirical plays that were a big hit with his contemporaries. There are other interesting characters in the book, and Benner is very good at describing his relationships with family and friends, based on their letters or diaries. I especially liked his father Bernardo and his wife Marietta, who complained that her husband was always away on diplomatic missions. It would make a great TV series about politics. Highly recommended.

This is a lovely book: The real story of the people, the places, the ideas and the struggles of Florence and Rome in the 16th century written in a fun way. More like a novel than a history book. Erica Benner has written a book about the real Machiavelli and the real meaning of *The Prince*, with a lot of the wars and the battles and the Popes thrown in, that is a pleasure to read, especially for the non-academic reader (like me!). She interweaves a huge amount of original quotes from Machiavelli and his works, so you finally get to understand what he wrote, and why he wrote it. I loved it.

Erica Benner fascinatingly reinterprets Machiavelli from the familiar characterisation of an advocate of cynical manipulative pragmatic power seeking, to a politician dedicated to the ideals of a republic. Her text is very readable, almost a gripping informative novel about 15/16th century Italian politics. Benner claims Machiavelli favoured leadership by virtue supported by military might, which elicits democratic approval, contrasted to leadership by chance event relying on external unreliable

military support (p157-159). However, Machiavelli's criterion for this judgment still appears to be pragmatic success, rather than the intrinsic principle of virtue per se. A more profound ethical philosophy would need to examine the interaction between virtue, power, and the demos. Machiavelli himself is implicated in the inhumane siege of Pisa, which questions his definition of virtue and his commitment to it. He seems to have failed to implement his own advice, suffering banishment and leaving his family impoverished at his death. In contemporary politics, it is unnerving how easily democracy can fail to deliver virtue, and how it can also morph into dynasties, exemplified in the Bush and Clinton families in the USA, and the increasingly presidential style of government of UK Prime Ministers. We should heed Machiavelli's advice that "if you choose princes, expect them or their progeny to start seizing more powers than you gave willingly gave them, until they become tyrants" (p316).

For those familiar with Niccolo Machiavelli, "Be Like the Fox" will surely expand and augment their understanding of the man and his motivations. For those unacquainted with him, this vividly written and thoroughly researched novel is a wonderful introduction to his life and times. It is not necessary to have read Machiavelli's "The Prince" prior to reading Erica Benner's very engaging book, but you will almost certainly want to read it afterward. Whether you're a Machiavelli neophyte or scholar, you'll find his story entertaining, informative, and full of history, intrigue, humor, and characterful personalities. Over five-hundred years later, Machiavelli's observations on human nature and politics are more relevant than ever, and it is fascinating to follow their development through Benner's narrative.

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