

Pilpel, Robert H. *Between Eternities*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985. Pp. 559. \$19.95.

*Between Eternities* is a brilliant novel, masterfully conceived and splendidly executed. Set in Rome, 180 A.D., the novel traces the fortunes of one Lucius Celer, a once celebrated but now retired athlete, who was born and raised on the Roman streets and who, as the result of a chance meeting, became the lifelong but sorely tested friend of Marcus Aurelius. As the novel opens, Lucius has been condemned for treason by Commodus, the brash new emperor, but the manner and time of his death have yet to be decided. If permitted to commit suicide, Lucius' family and property may remain safe, but if executed, his loved ones and estate face certain ruin. Tormented by doubts and fears, Lucius confides his uncertainty to a journal, and it is through this first person narration that we first come to know him in his sixtieth year.

Had Pilpel limited his narration to the first person present, the novel might have been entertaining enough, but taking his cue from the *Meditations* where Marcus Aurelius says "As the earth is a pinpoint in infinite space, so the life of man is a pinpoint in infinite time—a knife edge between eternities," Pilpel contrives to show us both sides of the blade and, through an ingenious device, suddenly arranges for Lucius to begin writing his autobiography, for the clear purpose of reexamining his life in order to eliminate his fear of death. Thereafter, for the remaining 531 pages of the novel, Pilpel alternately counterpoints a chapter from the *Life* against an entry or entries from the *Journal*; the result gives the illusion of a perfectly poised dual plot—Lucius as a youth growing into manhood played off against Lucius as an aging hero who is fighting for his life. Both plots are, of course, the same plot, the means by which Lucius Celer will eventually fulfill the prescription of Delphi by learning to know himself, and one can only admire the author's skillful, technical achievements in devising and completing the novel's structure.

A historian by training, Pilpel's eye for the telling detail is sharp, and clearly, the work here is based on extensive, careful research. Not even in *I, Claudius* does one find such fully realized visual images of the various precincts of Rome, Italy, or the Empire, and this, certainly, is no small achievement. It may sound trite to say so, but Rome comes alive under Pilpel's pen, to the eye as well as the mind, leaving one with more than a profound impression of having been a part of the action, of having seen the city and the empire at a variety of levels, in a variety of ways.

One of the book's more impressive strengths is withheld from the reader until the novel's second half. There, in full accord with the time/space relationships necessitated by the plot—but at last, Pilpel recreates the atmosphere of the Greek games. Through inspired writing, the reader is fully absorbed into Lucius' athletic career as he performs, first, on the "Novice Circuit" in Italy before moving on to the Panathenaea and the Big Four athletic meetings at Nemea, Corinth, Delphi, and Olympia that will comprise the recurring pinna-

cles of his life as a professional competitor. Again, Pilpel is more than familiar with the ground, his recreation of the scene more than merely effective.

Here, too, is an inviting, inventive portrait of Marcus Aurelius, not the flat, factual rendering of the chronicles but a magnetic, speculative character study of the growing young man who would eventually become emperor. Pilpel explores many of Marcus' philosophical positions, his austerities, his strengths, and his very human faults: the portrait is far from one sided, and in the last analysis, it seems as fine a literary achievement as the author's careful delineation of the protagonist.

In the parlance of the book trade, *Between Eternities* is good writing on the basis of good research—a good read, a very good read, indeed.

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