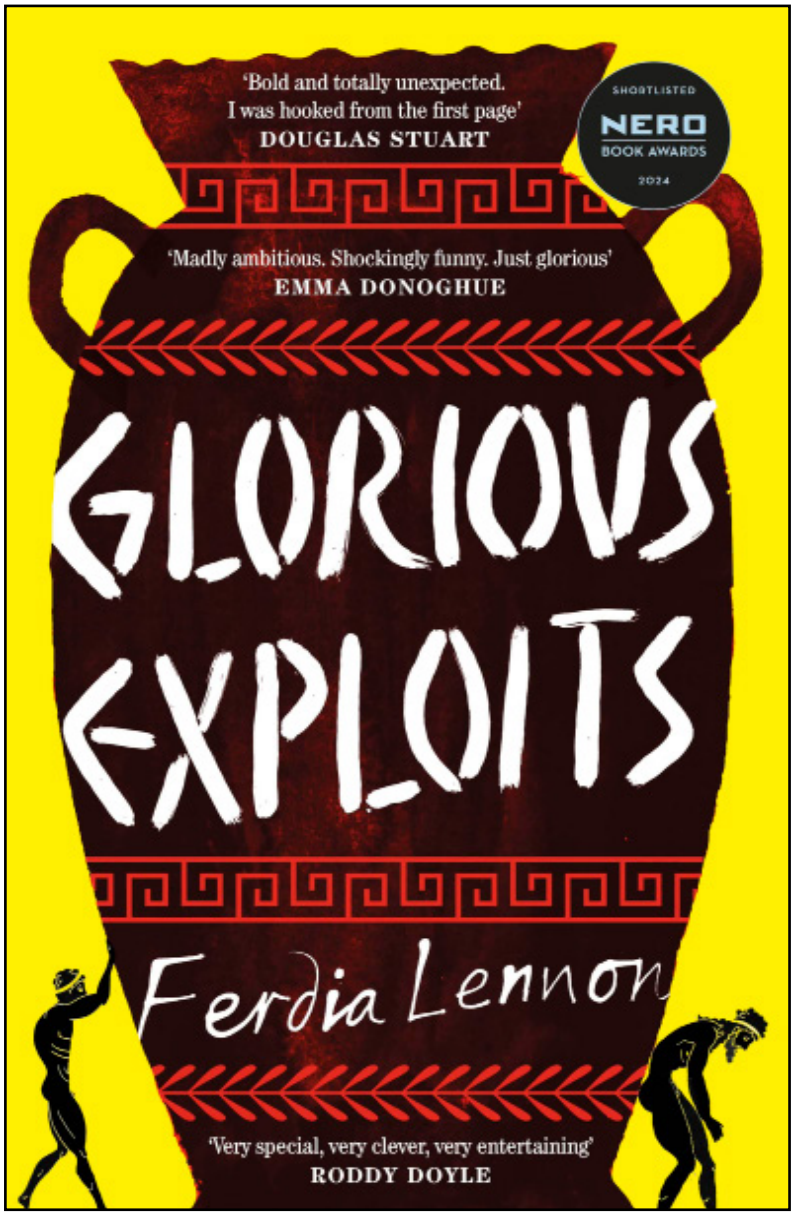


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4.

The directors arrive early – Gelon and Lampo, here for a casting. My head's killing me. I got sick twice on the way, yet here we are, and we're early. Why? Because it matters. That's what Gelon says. The relationship between an actor and a director is all about trust. Belief. I look at these Athenians before me – row upon row of chained skeletons – and belief seems an unlikely thing, performing a play impossible, but looks deceive. That's what Gelon says. He says Euripides' *Hippolytus* was put on during the plague at Athens. That though the city was ravaged, and bodies lay piled in the streets, and the sky was black with funeral smoke, the festival of Dionysia went on. Half the actors were dying. The audience too, yet the chorus sang; they danced. Gelon says this made it even better. That it gave the actors a frenzy most remarkable. In the same way, a soldier who's been dealt a fatal blow sometimes fights more fiercely than ever in those final moments. In just this way, those Athenians gave something special. Something beyond the normal run of tragedy. We're doing nothing but following their precedent. Carrying on where they left off all those years ago in Athens. That's what Gelon says. What he hopes.

We've chosen Laurium for our production: being sickle-shaped, with a bulge in the centre, it looks in many ways like an enormous amphitheatre. There's a spot at the quarry's edge where the limestone juts out to form a milky roof, below which is an abundance of shade. This we choose as our rehearsal space. Gelon sets out a couple of wineskins and a few loaves of bread. Already a gaggle of Athenians hover around us, their

eyes zigzagging from the food to our clubs. In the midst of the crowd, I notice a pair of green eyes staring: lizard-green.

'Paches! How are you?'

Paches waves a splintery hand, and I walk over, embrace him. I can feel the veins in his arm: flowing twigs that move around the skin as I squeeze. I tell him we're doing a full production of *Medea* with a chorus, masks and shit. He nods. I tell him that on account of his eyes and his previous recital, he's our first choice for the role of Jason, and it will mean a full belly for at least a month. Sure, the prisoners get rations from the guards, but they're starvation rations: just enough to keep them alive, if even that, and at the mention of proper food Paches starts crying. It's fierce strange seeing water flow from a source so dry. I hand him a wineskin and a lump of bread. Now I've been hungry, and I've been thirsty, but never like this. With every bite and sip, his eyes gain light. Wisps of pink form around the cheeks, spread all across the face and neck. Paches wipes the tears from the green and stands a little straighter, asks me when we start and who we've chosen to play Medea. I give him more bread.

'Today it's just a casting,' says I. 'And so far we've only picked you. You're our first choice, Paches. This is a mighty honour. Don't let me down.'

Paches nods and chews. Athenians watch with anguished awe. They look from him to me and search for a reason. I put my arm around him.

'You may know this fellow as Paches, but from now on, he's Jason. I want him only referred to as Jason. Is that clear?'

The Athenians seem confused, but they nod all the same.

'You're Jason now, Paches.'

The bread's gone, but he still sucks away at the wineskin. You can almost see the swelling the liquid makes as it flows down his throat; hear a faint splash when it hits the stomach. To be honest, Gelon didn't want him as Jason, but I insisted. I rub his head

affectionately, the way I've seen aristo mates do in the gymnasium. His hair's sparse, but what is left is mighty black. I imagine with the green eyes Paches was once something to look at. I stroke the hair, and it comes away in my hand, a light breeze lifts the strands up and scatters them all across the quarry.

'Who are you?'

He hands back the wineskin. It's empty.

'Thank you.'

'Who are you?'

'Paches.'

'No, you're Jason. Who are you?'

'Pa—Jason.'

'You hear that, lads? He's Jason!'

The Athenians stare at us, nod.

Paches says there's an Athenian in the quarry who's acted in a load of plays. Not the official ones in Athens, but small rural theatres around Attica. Still, a proper actor could be the making of this production, and we leave Gelon with the rest and set off to find him. Paches is real slow, and I keep having to stop and wait for him to catch up.

'Come on, Jason!' says I. 'How'd you ever get the fleece with that attitude?'

The quarry walls offer the best prospect of shade, but Paches and I stick to the centre. In the centre, there are tall rocks, and though I'm not the nimblest, I can climb them, higher and higher. So high the quarry opens up its secrets to me. Up here, I've seen it all. Their burials, their fights, the tree they prayed at. The only green thing in all the quarry, and how in the end they pulled it down and ate it. I've heard their chanting, their crying too. Some days I've sat on such a rock for hours, till my legs ached, but that wasn't it. It was only beginning then; I'd sit till the legs went numb, and I forgot them, and then something

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