

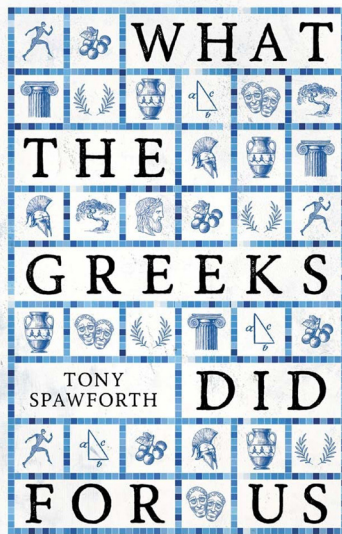
## Book Review

### What the Greeks Did for Us

Spawforth (T.). Pp. x + 335, b/w & colour pls. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. Cased, £20. ISBN: 978-0-300-25802-8

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‘This book does not allow the concerns of elite culture to dominate content.’ ‘A role in shaping the cultural texture of everyday life and popular taste is a worthwhile measure of the enduring influence of ancient Greece.’ These two quotations from Tony Spawforth’s Prologue sum up his aim succinctly. His three introductory examples (which give an idea of the range within the chapters which follow) are a word like ‘pandemic’, the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex, and a replica Parthenon in a Chinese theme park (as well

as those in Bavaria and Nashville, Tennessee).

The scope of evidence is sensibly limited by Spawforth, defining the ‘us’ in the title as largely the Anglosphere and the time span as, in essence, the 400s and 300s BC. One of the delights of this book for me was the frequent autobiographical interludes which help, in his words, ‘to leaven the loaf’.

He claims throughout that he is focusing on the ‘now’ but, as is inevitable, that means significant references to the intervening centuries. The Romans, as we know, were in thrall to Greek thought (e.g. Stoicism) and elements of entertainment (re-enactments of sea battles such as Salamis and drama and poetry based on Greek myth). To take examples of a more recent kind, there was the Spartan idealism of Nazi Germany and the Periclean instincts of Boris Johnson (ancient history now?).

Chapter 3 begins with a striking sentence – ‘Ancient Greeks were fascinated by male genitalia’! This intriguingly leads to a discussion on ‘ethnic distinctions’ (the link being a vase painting depicting a circumcised Egyptian and an uncircumcised Greek). To give an example of the range of citations within just this one chapter, the following all get a mention: Naomi Campbell, J. Paul Getty, P.D. James’ Adam Dalgliesh, the American plantation owner William J. Grayson, *Dungeons and Dragons* and Cleopatra.

There follows a chapter on sex. Did you know that in 2018 3,000–4,000 gay women visited the island of Lesbos? The next chapter covers the plethora (a good Greek word!) of Greek words in English and the power of Greek rhetoric (Pericles inspires Lincoln at Gettysburg). There is an intriguing chapter entitled ‘Facts and Alternative Facts’. How ‘true’ is Thucydides’ history? Can you believe Herodotus (with a nice sideline on *The English Patient*)? The links to ‘fake news’ are clear.

‘Poetry Matters’ concentrates on Homer where it is obvious that his influence stretches to all kinds of societies and media. Amongst the more recent evidence Spawthorp cites *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the video game *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*.

Greek statues have a chapter to themselves. Nazi ideology and modern American white supremacists figure prominently. They lead on to an interesting discussion on the colour(s) of the statues. Colour is also discussed in a chapter on buildings. Among the advocates of classical architecture are King Charles III and, perhaps slightly more surprisingly, Donald Trump. It is probably difficult in small town America to find a courthouse or town hall that does not have a Greek temple-style frontage!

It won’t be a surprise that the author has plenty to say about the cinema and the small screen. Many will not be too familiar with the 1910 *The Death of Socrates* or the 1911 *The Fall of Troy* but will (along with children of today) have been delighted by the 1973 *Jason and the Argonauts*. Spawforth has some fun with the ‘inaccuracies’ of *Alexander* but is quite impressed by the ‘visual stylishness’ of *300*.

And so to the Olympics, via the Much Wenlock games with its wheelbarrow race! Details discussed include nudity, female participation, amateurism and the abiding ‘obsession’ with games in most British and American schools.

The final chapter looks at the stage. It starts with no less than six pages on Isadora Duncan. The author goes on to point out that the catharsis element of tragedy and the sort of messaging inherent in, for example, *Frogs* and *Lysistrata*, make Greek plays a continuing choice for modern-day producers.

This is an excellent book full of detail and analysis coupled with humour and anecdote. It seems suitable for all ages and for those whose knowledge of the ancient world is limited or even non-existent. There are 23 pages of notes and a page of bibliography, but both can safely be ignored by most readers.

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