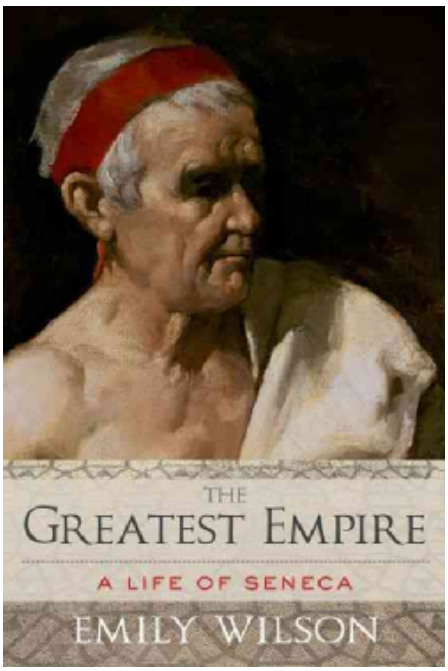

The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca

Emily Wilson

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By any measure, Seneca (?4-65AD) is one of the most important figures in both Roman literature and ancient philosophy. He was the most popular writer of his day, and his writings are voluminous and diverse, ranging from satire to philosophical "consolations" against grief, from metaphysical theory to moral and political discussions of virtue and anger. He was also the author of disturbing, violent tragedies, which present monstrous characters in a world gone wrong. But Seneca was also deeply engaged with the turbulent political events of his time. Exiled by the emperor Claudius for supposed involvement in a sex scandal, he was eventually brought back to Rome to become tutor and, later, speech-writer and advisor to Nero. He was an important eyewitness to one of the most interesting periods of Roman history, living under the rule of five of the most famous--and infamous--emperors (Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero), through the Great Fire of Rome (64AD), and at a time of expansion and consolidation of Roman imperial power throughout the Mediterranean world, as well as various foreign and internal conflicts. Suspected of plotting against Nero, Seneca was condemned and ultimately took his own life in what became one of the most iconic suicides in Western history.
The life and works of Seneca pose a number of fascinating challenges. How can we reconcile his bloody, passionate tragedies with his prose works advocating a life of Stoic tranquility? Furthermore, how are we to reconcile Seneca the Stoic philosopher, the man of principle, who advocated a life of calm and simplicity, with Seneca the man of the moment, who amassed a vast personal fortune in the service of an emperor seen by many, at the time and afterwards, as an insane tyrant? In this vivid biography, Emily Wilson presents Seneca as a man under enormous pressure, struggling for compromise in a world of absolutism. The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca thusoffers us, in fascinating ways, the portrait of a man with all the fissures and cracks formed by the clash of the ideal and the real: the gulf between political hopes and fears, and philosophical ideals; the gap between what we want to be, and what we are.

The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca Details

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From Reader Review The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca for online ebook

Robert says

The Greatest Empire is an excellent biographical account of Seneca, the Roman philosopher and advisor to Nero. It draws on known facts and makes good use of Seneca's writings to flesh out the gaps, notably his essays and his plays.

I've reviewed other books about Seneca and Roman stoics recently, so I want to spend a little time here focusing on a few issues rather than taking on Wilson's book as a whole. If you are interested in Rome, the emperor's, or stoicism, by all means read it yourself. The best chapter is the epilogue, which traces Seneca's influence over the subsequent 2,000 years.

The Greatest Empire refers to Seneca's contention to that the inner life was much more important than external affairs. His life problems, of course, were that he ran afoul of the emperor Claudius and after compromising himself as Nero's apologist, he received Nero's order to commit suicide, an order he obeyed. Nonetheless he lived into his 60s, wrote widely and extensively, and became fabulously wealthy, all of which represents his quick wits, pliability, and intellectual energy.

The major question about Seneca is whether he was a hypocrite, dismissing worldly affairs in his writings while submerging himself in them in his personal comings and goings. At least, he was a compromised individual. More generously, one might say he was overwhelmed by imperial power and didn't always have much choice about his fate, except in what he wrote. But something occurs to me when I compare the stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius with Seneca. Seneca's writing is polished, clever, virtually a new style of writing Latin (he was a key figure in what is known as the Silver Age of Latin literature). Marcus Aurelius didn't conceive of himself as a major literary or philosophical figure,but he wrote much more directly and honestly about his struggles.

This leads one to the question not so much of Seneca's hypocrisy as his staginess, his coyness, his loftiness. There is a great, great deal of wisdom in his writing and it includes spectacular self-awareness and depth perception in terms of human nature in general. But as a reader, does one trust him, does one take him to heart, does one feel on some kind of a level with him?

In a way, all pronounced exercises in literary style must meet two tests: One test is transient and the results rise and fall with time. By that I mean tastes change. Going in and out of fashion is an unreliable measure of an author's worth. More important is the issue of whether an author's style emerges out of a desire to take a reader into his depths or is designed to delight and intrigue the reader at a distance. In a sense, this makes us judge a writer's honesty, whether he is writing for show and admiration or in search of connection and communication. The Greatest Empire as a phrase conveys something of what I mean. It's a ludicrous phrase, grand, pretentious, and somewhat empty.

One more point, however: it has to be conceded that as the ancient Greeks felt less in control of their fate, they became more inward-looking and, to use Seneca's favorite word, indifferent to what was going on in the world around them. The same thing happened in Rome under the Caesars. There was a still a Senate,but it had no power. This rendered the nobility much less influential and certainly encouraged a philosophy of indifference such as Stoicism. So Seneca was compromised, twisted, and tormented by enormous political forces that no one--in fact, not even emperors--could bring to heel. In this context, what we have is not so

much an issue of the validity of Seneca's writing but a connection to his mortal personality, one we may not like. He was just a man, and no matter how showy he could be, he seems to have realized that.

Michael Baranowski says

I got this book a while ago, and it took me forever to finish. This has nothing to do with Emily Wilson's writing or analysis, both of which seem first-rate to me. The problem is that Seneca is my least-favorite Stoic, and someone who I generally feel was a huge hypocrite and a fairly unscrupulous person. It's unfortunate that he's the author of some of the best Stoic writing.

The American Conservative says

"The Greatest Empire is one of the most engaging, thoughtful intellectual biographies I have read in some time, and Wilson is at her best when discussing Seneca’s ability to navigate the Roman court while preserving a degree of philosophical autonomy from the very real barbarism of politics. Much of her analysis relies on a critical exegesis of Seneca’s writing, which appears deceptively simple on its face but often turns out to be subtle and playful. If scholars have not suspected the link between persecution and the art of writing in Seneca’s craft before, Wilson’s book will go some way in making the claim that Seneca—and by implication other Roman writers—deserves a second, more careful reading."

David Bahr's review: http://www.theamericanconservative.co...

Kate says

Wished it had more quotes and descriptions of his work, but otherwise a very readable account of his life, critics, admirers. Covered what to take away from his work and how his philosophy influenced others, which seemed thorough and convincing.

Ros says

Published in Aus as Seneca: A Life

Joe says

The more biographies I read, the more I realise that Great men are remembered not for the truth, but for the image that they created. From Michelangelo, with his embellished autobiography, to Napoleon with the falsified battle reports and propaganda paintings, Seneca is no different.

All of his works are carefully constructed, acting as public performance to display his Roman morals. For example, his letter to his mother, which he wrote during his exile to Corsica, outlines the traditional modes of

overcoming grief and emotional disturbance, something which Seneca succeeded in when discussing the death of his son, who died in infancy.

When juxtaposed with how Seneca actually lived, it is not surprising that he falls short when compared to Rufus, Epictetus, or Aurelius. Seneca moulded the Stoic doctrine to align to his circumstance: being rich becomes a prefered indifference.

However, Seneca was stuck between the political pressures of the early Roman Empire and the stoic ideals that he lamented over. Only through his letters and plays could he express these, however concealed they were. As the pressure of Nero increased, this need for freedom increased. Eventually, Nero outgrew Seneca, and denied him life. Seneca killed himself, not as a Stoic sage, but as a man who tried his best to live the stoic principles during a time where speaking, or not speaking, would get you killed.

"One can also admire the ways that he kept trying, despite his failures- just as he had done in life, in his constant attempts to continue along the path of philosophical virtue." (p.231).

Vincent Li says

One of the better biographies of an ancient roman I've read. The book feels more substantial and scholarly than more popular biographies such as Everitt's Cicero. I prefered Wilson's strategy of filling in gaps through hints in Seneca's literary work than general historical approach that Everitt takes. For example, Everitt discusses Cicero's childhood by drawing inferences from the typical Roman childhood, Wilson focuses on Seneca's writing on his own childhood (he portrays himself as self-made, even though he came from a wealthy provincial equestrian background) as well as the surviving works by Seneca's father on rhetoric to draw conclusions. I particularly enjoyed the extended discussion by Wilson on the practice of declamation, where young Romans would argue various hypotheticals in public to practice their rhetoric. Even during the height of the declamation craze (where youngest often argued in public, and it was treated as a competitive sport), declamation was criticized as overly focused on inane hypotheticals. I particularly enjoyed this detour as a law student, declamation and its criticisms are highly applicable to the "hypos" professors subject law students to.

The book can properly be summarized as a literary biography, and I feel like I would have benefited if I had more exposure to the primary materials (though this biography has made me want to pick up Anger, Mercy, and Revenge again). In fact, the book reads like an extended thesis on Seneca's psyche through his literary work, but this is a positive not a negative. Wilson is generally nuanced when it comes to historical description (for example, she does not take a stance on if Seneca actually committed the adultery he was exiled for, laying out evidence on both sides without weighing in herself) and discusses the various sources for general historical claims. Wilson places Seneca's major works in the context of the phase of life he was in and the historical context. For example, Wilson sees On Benefits, as Seneca's attempt to understand and explain his reaction to Nero's murder of Agrippina, who recalled Seneca from exile (Seneca argues how certain benefits are not really benefits because he is indifferent to them, and the subtle obligations that benefits create). Wilson interprets On Anger, and On Mercy as Seneca's attempts to guide a young Nero (On Mercy cleverly praising and guiding at the same time by praising qualities that Seneca claimed already existed in Nero). Seneca's works on nature are interpreted as an attempt to get away from courtly matters by zooming out into the universe, and his tragedies are treated as semi-autobiographical. However, Wilson does not entirely read Seneca literally. A prevailing theme throughout the book is the "theatricality" of Seneca's writing, Seneca writes in a sort of doublespeak (which Wilson argues is result of courtly life at this time,

where the Emperor still paid homage to traditional Roman power structures while everyone knew that the emperor had all the power) and in ways the writing is contrived. For example, while in exile, Seneca wrote his mother a letter, which was really meant to be read by the general public. In it, he effusively praises his mother's chastity (Wilson argues this is an echo of the adultery charge that was leveled against Seneca), and complains about his exile in a horrible rocky island without civilization (incidentally earning the ire of Corsicans forever). Wilson notes that even at Seneca's time, there would have been a thriving civilization on the island, and Seneca was allowed to bring a retinue. Wilson notes that several times Seneca ratherly dramatically claims to have desired to want to kill himself, but was only stopped by his selfless thoughts of leaving his loved ones behind (first his father, than his wife).

Another prevailing theme of the biography are the charges of hypocrisy against Seneca. Wilson does not try to rationalize or justify the various times that the wise Seneca seems particularly pathetic. For example, Wilson criticizes how Seneca groves before Claudius's freedman in an attempt to be recalled from exile, only to lambast Claudius in Pumpkinification when Claudius passes away. Wilson attempts to explain the charge that Seneca claimed to not have cared about wealth while actually amassing a huge personal fortune under Nero. Wilson argues that to the stoics, wealth was an indifference, that the stoics believed that wealth was morally neutral, and all things equal it was better to have it than not have it. Nevertheless, Wilson is critical of Seneca's lack of perspective when it came to slavery or vast wealth inequality (while recognizing that few others cared either at the time). Ultimately, Wilson paints a sympathetic portrayal of Seneca, as a man of many contradictions (trying to assert control over his own life, and enjoying solitude but also constantly gravitating towards the center of power in the grandest stage of the time) but striving to do better (the stoics believed that perfect sagehood was achievable, though Seneca always considered himself on the path to this sagehood and not at the destination). Wilson starts with a telling of Seneca's death. Forced to commit suicide by Nero, Seneca first slits his wrists, but does not die. Seneca then drinks hemlock (following his hero Socrates) but this does not work either. Seneca finally steps into a hot bath, where the steam suffocates him. While Seneca claims to have spent his entire life preparing to die, his death does not go according to plan. However, that is what makes his life so interesting, the gap between the reality and the idealism, and what makes Wilson's biography worth reading. In an epilogue, Wilson discusses Seneca's posthumous influence, including on early christian thought (to the point where someone forged letters between Seneca and Paul and claimed his death was a disguised baptism) to thinkers such as Montaigne.

Elizabeth says

I almost never read biographies; they're just not a genre I care for all that much. I decided to read this one because I've enjoyed reading some of Seneca's own writings; I read Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero in 2014 and wanted to read another writer's take on Seneca; and I'm doing a book challenge that calls for a biography. So I was pleasantly surprised that I really liked this book.

As its title says, *Dying Every Day* focuses only on one period in Seneca's life. Wilson writes about the entirety of Seneca's life. And since there are lots of gaps in what we know about his life, even the best-documented bits, she writes about other things, giving a context for Seneca's life. So I learned a bit about childhood in a wealthy Roman family, about Seneca's family members, about the role of rhetoric in Roman life, etc. Wilson analyzes Seneca's writings, pairing a philosophical work with a tragedy, and trying to correlate them with what was going on in his life at the time (dating most of his writings is a challenge). The epilogue connects Seneca to the present day, tracing the influence of his writings through the centuries after his death, both in drama and philosophy. (I admit being most interested in the connection with The Hunger Games!) Wilson is tackling a complicated subject—there's philosophy, literary criticism, and history in all

this—but I thought her writing style was readable, not dull and academic. Recommended, assuming you'd be interested in this topic in the first place.

Italo Italophiles says

The Greatest Empire is a biography of the philosopher, writer, politician Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who was born in Cordoba, Spain circa 4 B.C. and who died, by his own hand under political pressure, in 66 A.D.

I should state right away that the "Greatest Empire" referred to in the title is not the Roman Empire, under which Seneca lived. Seneca, a master of wordplay, believed that if one could conquer oneself, control one's own impulses, then one had conquered the greatest empire possible. To be Emperor of oneself was Seneca's goal in life, but one that he could not always live up to, because he was, after all, human.

This scholarly work, which I received as a review-copy, includes a timeline, maps, notes, further reading suggestions, a bibliography, art credits and a full Index. The writing style is convoluted, stilted, and dryly academic at times. But the author's female perspective on a paternalistic and misogynistic society is refreshing to read. And she provides parenthetical explanations for those readers who are not up to speed on Roman and Mediterranean history.

In Seneca's case, there is the risk that the era was more interesting than the man, which was a thought I had at times while reading this book. Seneca was a Socratic and Stoic philosopher, a writer of literature, plays and popular aphorisms, and a speechwriter for his former pupil, the Emperor Nero. Seneca is 18 years old when Rome's first permanent Emperor dies, Augustus. Then Seneca lives through the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. The Emperor Nero pressures Seneca to take his own life.

I found the sections of the book that discuss the philosophies of the era the most interesting: Cynicism, Hedonism, Platonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Peripatetics, the Pythagorians, and the Sextians! Everybody wanted to find solace in life and to "overcome grief, pain and fear of death". Judaism was the annoying old-timer of philosophies because the followers of the monotheistic Judaism refused to worship Roman Emperors. And the relatively new Catholicism was just as troublesome.

What was Seneca like, based on what the author tells us? Well, he was pretty typical for his class, time, and place. He was a macho jerk, self-righteous, self-important, ambitious, self-pitying, pompous, falsely modest, a narcissist, a slave owner, and a hypocrite.

Seneca's insights into human nature still apply to us today, since human nature is the one true constant over time. The author states Seneca's ever-true observation: "...psychological truth of his central insight that watching acts of pain and cruelty does real harm to our souls."

That harm is a fact. Our moral compass is destroyed by watching real and simulated acts of pain and cruelty. Children can be exposed to that harm without choice, but most people damage themselves by their choices of cultural consumption. Perhaps that insight alone is reason for people to continue to read Seneca's philosophical works?

Please read my full and illustrated review at Italophile Book Reviews.
http://italophilebookreviews.blogspot...

Jonathon Day says

An excellent overview of a fascinating character within philosophy.

I started this book as an ardent admirer of Seneca and his stoicism. This book does an excellent job of outlining the life of the man behind the words. A man who compromised, lied and usurped his principles in the service of the emperor Nero. This, and his vast wealth, has lead many later writers to dismiss him as a hypocrite who's words bear no relation to his actions.

Wilson acknowledges these views and is unsentimental in her depictions of Seneca and his actions (especially his complicity in the murder of Agripina). However, the fact Seneca tried to adhere to these values he preached, the fact he often seemed aware of his failings and ultimately died by them acts as a somewhat redemptive arc.

The life and writings of Seneca are still very valuable and deserve to be more widely known and with this excellent book Wilson has hopefully contributed more to this legacy.

B. Rule says

This is a strikingly perceptive literary biography of Seneca. Wilson does great work giving close readings of Seneca to show the internal tensions between his philosophical program and his role as advisor to Nero, as well as his efforts to maintain a philosophical poise despite his clearly passionate and ambitious nature, which often finds him seeking the approbation of others, the comforts of wealth, and experiencing deep grief upon the loss of his friends. What really elevates this work is the brief but dense epilogue which traces the Senecan legacy through the history of Western thought, showing how Christians first appropriated his Stoic views through Paul (and apocryphal letters between Seneca and Paul), later disclaimed his position as arrogance antithetical to grace, and then going on to trace how his prose and plays were received by the humanists, later moderns, and up to the present day (including a surprisingly fair treatment of The Hunger Games!). This book ended up surprising me with the depth of analysis, and while Wilson is no Seneca partisan, she approaches him with sympathy and dark humor, and manages to paint a vivid picture of his philosophical project and his foibles as a person. Highly recommended.

Calenciaga says

loved it

Grady McCallie says

This literary biography of the Stoic Roman philosopher Seneca would probably be of greatest value to

someone who has read (or even better, has read and is familiar with) one or more of Seneca's works. Even without that, I found the book a helpful introduction to Seneca's life, though the close readings of his works, always placed in the context of his life, were sometimes slow going. Wilson balances an appreciation for Seneca's abilities and intelligence with an acknowledgment of his less pleasant qualities - egoism, constant image-crafting, and bland acceptance of the gross inequities of the Roman Empire. The epilogue is immensely useful, briefly charting Seneca's cultural and intellectual impact since his death, down to his place in the current Stoic revival.

I belong to a current political tradition that holds one cannot think seriously about ethics without contemplating its relationship to privilege and the social distribution of power and opportunity. Seneca doesn't measure up well against that highly anachronistic standard: he served as tutor and advisor to Nero, was implicated in some of his crimes, and accumulated grotesque wealth from his high office held at the emperor's pleasure. And yet, Wilson points out, at the moments when Seneca depicted himself practicing restraint and moderation, he was living an immensely privileged existence, dependent on dozens of slaves to prepare and serve him 'simple food' while he contemplated his virtue. Wilson presents Seneca as constantly critiquing himself; it is less clear whether this was sincere on the Roman's part, or just another way of buffing his literary persona. The combination of obliviousness to modern concerns about social justice, and obsessive concern about personal freedom and image crafting, make Seneca much less appealling as a model for how to live than his near-contemporaries Musonius Rufus and Epictetus.

Domhnall says

"So I don't live one way and talk another," says the wise man; "I talk one way and you hear another. You don't even ask what my words mean."

Seneca was tutor to the young Nero and, when Nero became emperor, wrote his speeches for many years. His famous philosophical writings are seen as a great source of wisdom in the Stoic tradition, but they have a jarring quality which his contemporaries summed up in one word that remains valid: "hypocrite." The reality is that much of his supposedly disinterested "philosophy" turns out to be carefully constructed propaganda to turn aside opponents of either Nero or the Empire or Seneca himself. Nero was of course a psychopath, Seneca his close adviser and propagandist.

As a result, we see for example an extended discussion about the unimportance of material wealth, which has no effect on the integrity of the true sage, produced at a moment when Seneca himself was being criticised for amassing one of the greatest personal fortunes in the entire empire.

You may feel that we can nevertheless take Seneca's philosophical writings on their own merits and apply them to our own lives today. Well, that's true, but we will find in the process that his philosophy has important gaps and internal contradictions which undermine their value. If we fail to appreciate this then we will be led down the garden path and it is best understood by looking at the historical context of their writing.

To be fair, Wilson gives full credit to the ingenuity – even genius - of Seneca’s writing; sufficiently so for me to download an inexpensive collection of his writing and read some of his essays in full, which I found entertaining and rewarding. [Delphi Complete Works of Seneca the Younger (Illustrated)] However, Wilson makes critical comments on the work which are always helpful and can be very scathing. It is evident that she is not a supporter of his philosophical thinking and it is more than helpful to have her remarks in mind when at risk of being seduced by Seneca’s clever writing.

A final chapter describes some of the later influences through to modern times of both the prose and the plays of Seneca. His plays provided models for drama from medieval times; they provided templates at a time when theatre was just emerging from the old morality plays and they remain a living part of our theatrical heritage. His essays have also left lasting legacies, as much in style as in content, for example in those by Montaigne, while the incipient hypocrisy of his arguments is echoed in the following interesting remark, more pointed for being casual:

"It has been claimed that Thomas Jefferson was, perhaps unknowingly, using "the language of Stoic philosophy" when he drafted the Declaration of Independence, with its claim that "all men were created equal"; the masculine language ("men") is very much in tune with the Stoic emphasis on manly virtue (virtus) and on a model of social equality that has few implications for material or institutional change."

That is the final message about Seneca. He wrote beautiful and thoughtful material which is worth reading, but it is tricky, selective and myopic, with a poisonous core that is only really apparent after standing back to place the writing in its proper context.

Margaret Sankey says

Wilson focuses on Seneca's rise to power from landowner's son in provincial Spain to the speechwriter, tutor and confidante of Nero at the heart of the Roman empire, always navigating between the yearning for power and fame and the "greatest empire" of stoicism: rule over one's emotions and desires.
