

“This was, in every sense, what the Rubicon would prove to be. By crossing it, Caesar did indeed engulf the world in war, but he also helped to bring about the ruins of Rome’s ancient freedoms, and the establishment, upon their wreckage, of a monarchy—events of primal significance for the history of the West” (Rubicon, xv). *Rubicon* portrays the downfall of the Roman Republic as a messy drama between the power-hungry elite in Roman society as they escalate from the classic tit-a-tat of Republican politics to all out civil war that brought about its destruction. *Rubicon* does this in the form of a novel-like collection of stories detailing the backgrounds and major happenings of all the characters in the book.

While being a book on history, *Rubicon* reads less like a textbook or lecture and more like a novel. This is one of the book’s strong points. Textbooks and lectures, in general, are often dry, or at least hard to relate to, often focusing on dates and vague descriptions of events to relate what happened to the reader. Historical novels such as *Rubicon* have the luxury of giving the characters and events the treatment history normally doesn’t allow them. The last years of the Roman Republic transform from a series of dates and events to a vibrant story of believable characters with glories and follies acted out on the stage of Rome and the Mediterranean world, with entries on a timeline becoming plotlines that define the action of the book. While this is a strong point, it also creates a major weak point as well. To create said vibrant stories, details at best have to be stretched out and oftentimes completely fabricated in order to make the structure of a story work. As the author himself said, “In short, the reader should take it as a rule of thumb that many statements of fact in this book could plausibly be contradicted by an opposite interpretation,” (Rubicon, xx). While there exist primary source documents describing the time period, the detail is woefully incomplete for the historian trying to get into the hearts and minds of the major players of the fall of the Republic; so while there exist general facts that outline the course of events that happened, the exact details of actions such as speeches are often left to the interpretation of the author.

Another strong point of *Rubicon* is that the author goes into great detail about each sub-story within the greater story of the fall of the Republic. By detailing the characters and the changes in society

and/or culture within each story we get a more in depth look into the reasons and motivations behind the changes in the Roman civilization. The author starts out describing the history of Rome from its founding to the Gracchi Brothers. This is where some of the major themes of Roman society are introduced: the complicated paradoxical mess of Rome and its constitution, the extreme class divisions in Roman society, the idea that glory only brought the lust for more glory, and the abstract idea of the Republic as a bastion of liberty and greatness.

The author goes on to describe the Samnite revolts and introduces two of the major early characters, Marius and Sulla. The ongoing duel between Marius and Sulla, and later Sulla's dictatorship, defines the early part of the book. Several other important players are introduced, such as Cinna, Pompey, and Crassus. Two major slippery slopes are also introduced into Roman society: one is the use of violence to gain and hold onto power; the other is that power could be obtained at a younger and younger age for fewer qualifications, meaning those with power had less experience and wisdom to temper their judgments. The next chapter introduces Caesar and Cicero, and goes into great detail on all the major characters and their plays for power: Caesar's early military glories, Cicero's first trial, the political machinations of Crassus, and Pompey's mass popularity. As the book goes on, new characters are introduced and old characters are fleshed out and have their rises and falls. Lucullus is introduced as winning great victories in Asia. However, in doing so, he goes against the interests of big business, causing him to lose all the glory he had won. In reaction, he submits to hedonistic pleasures and wild extravagances. This is an ominous foreshadowing of the future state of the Republic. The ideals that had held the Republic firm for so long have been decaying, and Lucullus is a very potent symbol of this. In contrast, Cato is introduced as a stalwart defender of the values held dear by the Republic. He dressed and acted in the polar opposite of fashion, he had shared in the turmoil of war, and he used his own example to show how the morals of his enemies had decayed. From this point on, the story of the Republic starts to crumble.

Values and laws once held sacred are slowly discarded. The fighting of Clodius and Milo reinforces the thought that violence is an easier means to power than the standard way of climbing up the ladder, even if it comes at the expense of Republican values. The follies of excess pride and the fall into uncontrolled avarice are shown. Crassus manipulates a war against Parthia and promptly is defeated in battle and killed. Caesar refuses to disband his armies, starts civil war, and wins, but not without endless thousands of Romans, and the Republic itself, destroyed. Eventually Octavian gains power in the ensuing second civil war after Caesar's death, and "restores the Republic" at the cost of its freedom.

Along with inaccuracy, there is another negative side to the telling of history through fiction, and even in the telling of history in general. As histories are written by taking a variety of different sources and interpreting them to achieve a desired result, they are inherently subject to the biases of the interpreter, and this is even more apparent in the novel setting. Novels by their very nature are a series of interconnected stories that take heavy influence from the biases of the writer, much more so than the fact based interpretations of the historian. Not only does this result in the stretching of the truth, it often leads to unnecessary moralizing. *Rubicon* is rampant with this. The competition for glory within the Republic channeled by law to ensure that the state benefited is looked upon with a degree of awe by the author. Anything from the East, whether it is the Oriental despotism, culture, or its people, is looked at with a mix of scorn and disgust. Some of this comes naturally from describing the Roman viewpoint, and some of it is the standard Western raised-eyebrow for anything not of itself. The author used a wealth of primary sources for research, but this brings about its own problems. Many of these primary sources are written by the main characters involved in *Rubicon*, so they were heavily invested emotionally, and therefore their works need to be looked at with a greater degree of suspicion. Between interpreter bias and inaccuracy, and source material bias and inaccuracy, finding the "real" truth of events becomes a dangerous minefield.

Writing about an ancient topic from a modern perspective can often cause the author to create anachronistic parallels to events within the novel. While this makes history easier to relate to, it can also

make the reader look at ancient events from the not necessarily similar viewpoint of a modern citizen. Wealthy plebeians after 367 B.C. are compared to the pigs in *Animal Farm*. The gambles of Marius and Sulla are compared to the song "Luck Be a Lady". The machinations of Pompey and the Senate against Caesar before he made his fateful decision are compared to the Cold-War doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. Caesar's strategy in the beginning of the civil war is compared to the doctrine of blitzkrieg. Pompey's retreat, murder, and burial in Egypt are put in the context of the poem "Ozymandias". Finally, Cicero's speeches in his war against Antony were described as "a rage against the dying of the light," (Rubicon, 344) a nod to "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." It is dangerous territory to compare modern day military doctrines based on tanks and railroads and nuclear bombs to ancient military doctrines based on auxiliary light cavalry and stone roads and legions.

Collections of stories about the major players are used to tell the drama filled story of escalating lust for glory and decay of Republican values ending in civil war that *Rubicon* portrays the fall of the Roman Republic as being. While the format of a novel allows the author to help the reader better understand the characters and settings that historical events happened in, it also plagued by the stretching of fact and the biases of the interpreter and the source material. Overall, the novel format is a valid complement to the straight fact based approach of the textbook in understanding history.