



*Lives of The Stoics* by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman is a significant contribution to modern Stoic literature. It presents the lives and thoughts of twenty-six ancient Stoics, from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius. Although we know quite a bit about the lives of three famous 'Roman' Stoics - Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca - we know very little about the lives of earlier philosophers from Zeno and Helvidius. This is where the book makes a significant contribution.

Although the thoughts of the 'Greek Stoics' can be reconstructed from different sources such as Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, Book VII, Cicero's philosophical treatises and the works of the Platonist Plutarch, the Pyrrhonist Sceptic Sextus Empiricus and the physician Galen, we don't have any authoritative source on how the Stoics lived. For example, Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* is mostly anecdotal than authoritative. Because no authoritative source exists, any description of the lives of the Stoics will forever be anecdotal. This book is no exception.

Holiday and Hanselman tell the story of Stoicism by choosing to present plausible and interesting versions of events even when they are not necessarily authoritative. For example, there are several versions of how Epictetus became lame (or even if he was truly lame at all).

The authors here have chosen one of the many available versions. The advantage of this approach is that it gives the authors the freedom to concentrate on the Stoics' ideas in a version of the story they have chosen to present, since no authoritative version exists anyway.

*Lives of the Stoics* is well written, with biographical backgrounds of the Stoics interwoven with their teachings. Yet this book is no hagiography. Reviewing in some detail the lives of 26 Stoic philosophers, this what the authors have to say about them:

*No one in this book managed ... to live up to those lofty virtues of courage and justice and moderation and wisdom.*

They continue:

*Yet in their unique struggles and triumphs, they each managed to teach us something, proving, intentionally or not, why the principles they purported to believe were superior to the choices they actually made.*

*Lives of The Stoics* succeeds admirably in presenting how the Stoics faced the challenges of their times and mostly succeeded, though not always. From every Stoic life, we have something to learn.

While every portrait is well-written, some stand out. Take, for instance, the portrait of Cicero. His writings are much admired, and his essays on Stoicism are an excellent source of ancient Stoicism.

*He wrote a lot about virtues. And yet, he hardly applied them to his own life.*

*In short, when the moment counted, Cicero couldn't be counted on. [...]*

*So Cicero continued to write, but not live, philosophically. He continued to write about Stoicism, but declined to take any of it to heart. [...] He was like Diotimus, showing us what not to do.*

*Cicero's final work, surprisingly, would be on duty. He had never been a man whose career was about duty. Fame. Honor. Proving doubters wrong. That had been his drive. [...] They are words well written, as was nearly everything Cicero produced. What was missing, it seems, is any personal absorption of them. [...]*

Thus, Cicero's story is a cautionary tale for the rest of us, despite his brilliance and his lucid exposition of Stoicism.

The authors, however, paint a more sympathetic portrait of the controversial Stoic, Seneca. It is far from clear whether he continued to be with the increasingly irrational Nero purely to reform him, even though the authors seem to imply it:

*Was Seneca's steady hand a positive influence—one that Rome would have been worse off without? We cannot know. What we know is that Seneca tried.*

They acknowledge the possible weakness of Seneca when they observe,

*Or maybe his very real fear and these blind spots were compounded by the tempting self-interest of Seneca's position. It's hard to get someone to see, the expression goes, what their salary depends on them not seeing.*

But yet, when it comes to Seneca's possible involvement in the murder of Nero's mother or his defence of it, the authors don't have much to say, except this, in passive voice no less.

*One account has Nero attempting to have his mother killed in an elaborate boating accident. Finally, by 59 AD, the deed was done.*

Porcia Cato comes across as a remarkable woman and a unique Stoic. Many other portraits, such as that of Publius Rutilius Rufus and Cato the Younger, stand out as well.

There is one major shortcoming, though (at least as far as the present reviewer is concerned). While the book lists the sources that formed the basis for the *Lives*, the references are not specific. Since many biographical descriptions have more than one version, specific references to the sketches presented here would have been helpful. They would have made the book much more valuable for those who want to know more. This is a disappointing omission.

Despite my disappointment about references, I consider this book a great read, a wonderful reference book, and a worthwhile contribution to modern Stoic literature. I think this book should be in the library of every serious Stoic.

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