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Título: Poison King, The The Life And Legend Of Mithradates

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From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by by Carolyn See "The Poison King" is, as its subtitle makes clear, the story of the life of Mithradates, leader of the ancient Black Sea kingdom of Pontus, who, in the 1st century B.C., did everything he could to overthrow the Roman Empire. I read this biography as a layperson, not a scholar, but I can say without reservation that it's a wonderful reading experience, as bracing as a tonic, the perfect holiday gift for adventure-loving men and women. A finalist for this week's National Book Award, it's drenched in imaginative violence and disaster, but it also wears the blameless vestments of culture and antiquity. You can have all the fun of reading about a greedy villain being put to death by being made to "drink" molten gold, but still hide safe behind the excuse that you're just brushing up on your classics. Mithradates, as the royal heir of Pontus, was trained in all the manly sports and modeled his life on heroes of yore like Alexander the Great and Hannibal. Perhaps because of his suspicious, murderous mother, he took a lively interest from his earliest years in poisons and their antidotes. Quite a few of his relatives had been or would be poisoned, so this was a sensible precaution. When his father died and he ascended the throne, he married his own sister, who imprudently cheated on him when he went away on a trip. She was done away with; his siblings, either killed or imprisoned. Along the way, he developed an all-consuming hatred of the Roman Empire, which ruled its colonies and client states mercilessly, taxing even the wealthiest families into crippling debt, then selling the debtors into slavery. And so it was that in 88 B.C., by the order of Mithradates, "at least 80,000 -- perhaps as many as 150,000 -- Roman and Italian residents of Anatolia and [the] Aegean islands were massacred," reportedly in one day. It was the closest thing to genocide recorded in the Western world up to that time. Mithradates' reputation rested on that historic massacre -- and upon his extraordinary knowledge of poisons. He wasn't a very savory person, unless, perhaps, you hated the Roman Empire with all your heart. That's why this book seems so terrific to me. What would it even mean to hate the Roman Empire with all your heart? The passion here is breathtaking. The author tells us that Mithradates was portrayed as a monster by Roman historians, but to the people of what is now Turkey and surrounding areas, he was, at times, seen as a beloved hero. "The Poison King" provides us with both calm and distance. The author indirectly compares Mithradates to

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Osama bin Laden, and later, more surprisingly, to Christ. (Mithradates was also born under an auspicious star of the East and visited by wise men. And Christ himself, lest we forget, was executed by the Romans as a seditious troublemaker.) Mithradates' universal antidote, a substance he worked on for years so that he would never be poisoned, is a dream that lingers on in the modern world. A complicated potion called Mithridatium "became the most popular and longest-lived prescription in history, available in Rome as recently as 1984." The past is always with us. So reading about all the corpses and catastrophes, the flocks of poisoned ducks and the hives of poisoned honey, the monarch's botched sacrifice of a virgin (stymied by bursts of supernatural laughter), the meteors and omens, and most of all the wretched death that finally caught up with this headstrong despot, can be as peaceful as it is thrilling. Things haven't improved all that much in 2,100 years, but they haven't gotten much worse, either. If you're still in a position to read "The Poison King," that means you're alive and well, here on this perplexing, horrifying and beautiful Earth. bookworld@washpost.com