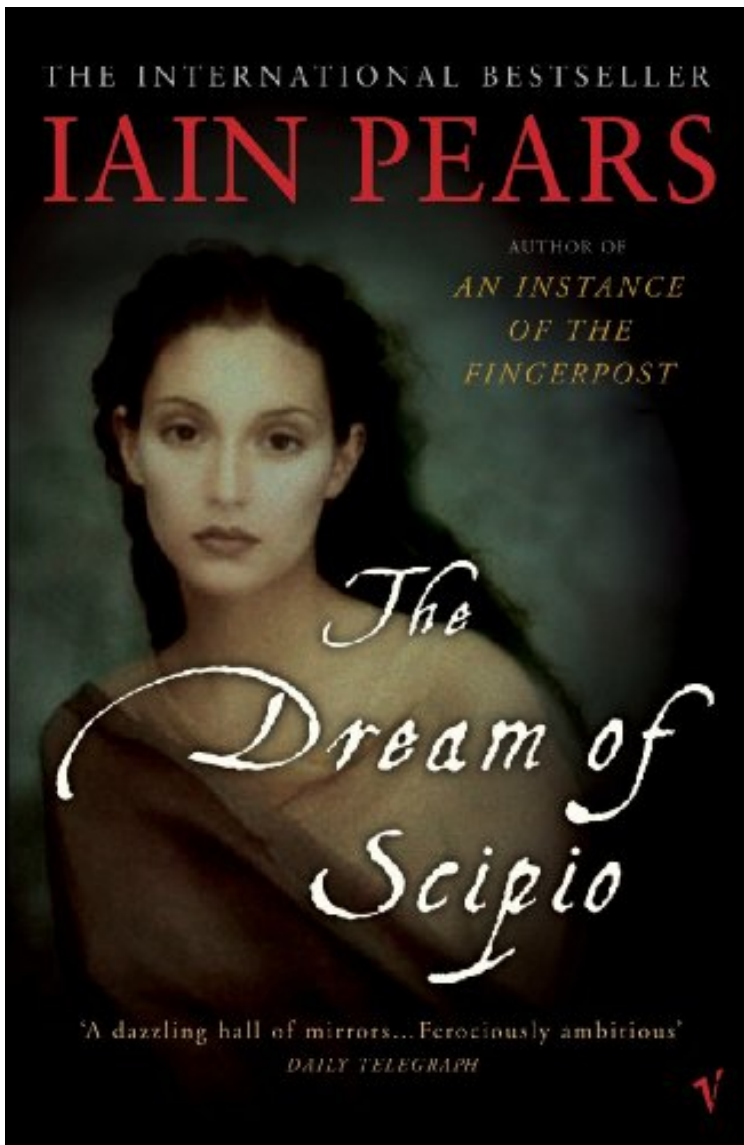


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The Dream Of Scipio



Par Iain Pears
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSet in Provence at three different critical moments of Western Civilisation - the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Black Death in the fourteenth, and the Second World War in the twentieth - The Dream of Scipio follows the fortunes of three men: Manlius Hippomanes, a Gallic aristocrat obsessed with the preservation of Roman civilisation, Olivier de Noyen, a poet, and Julien Barneuve, an intellectual who joins the Vichy government. The story of each man is woven through the narrative, linked by the classical text that gives the book its title, and by each man's love for an extraordinary woman. Dense, dark, erudite and yet, like An Instance of the Fingerpost, utterly compelling, The Dream of Scipio confirms Iain Pears as one of Britain's most imaginative novelists..comLike his elegant debut, An

Instance of the Fingerpost, Iain Pears's *The Dream of Scipio* is an inventive, gloriously detailed historical novel told from multiple viewpoints. But Pears has set himself an additional challenge by spreading his narrators over several centuries: there's the fifth century French nobleman and bishop, Manlius, a civilized man who has embraced the uncouth Christian faith in order to protect what he holds dear; an 11th-century scholar and troubadour named Olivier de Noyen, the famously ill-fated admirer of a married girl; and Julien Barneuve, an early 20th-century scholar of de Noyen who discovers, through him, a magnificent manuscript of Manlius's called "The Dream of Scipio." Though all three men come from the same small Provençal town, it is this manuscript, derived from the teachings of a wise woman, that links the three narrative threads of Pears's story. At the heart of *The Dream of Scipio* and, one suspects, at the heart of its author, is the conflict between a classical ideal of learning and the contemplation of beauty, and the noisy, uncivilized, democratizing impulses of the Christian era. A novel of ideas like its predecessor, *The Dream of Scipio* is neither chilly nor didactic and doesn't shy away from depicting the costs of its narrators' unpopular devotions.

--Regina Marler Extrait

In some ways, his fate was sealed the moment Olivier de Noyen first cast eyes on the woman he was to immortalize in his poems by the church of St. Agricole a few hundred meters from the pope's new palace in Avignon. Olivier was twenty-six, having been fated to live and die in what was possibly the darkest century in European history, an age many men called cursed, and which drove others all but insane with despair at God's vengeance for their sins. Olivier, it was said, was one such. Isabelle de Frjus was just sixteen and had been a wife for seven months, but was not yet pregnant, a fact that was already causing old women to gossip knowingly, and to make her husband angry. For her own part she was not displeased, as she was in no great rush to embark on the great gamble that left so many women dead or permanently afflicted. She had seen in her mother the terrible damage caused by her own birth, so swiftly followed by another and another, and was afraid. She did her duty by her husband, and prayed every night (after she had taken such precautionary measures as she knew) that her husband's assaults would prove fruitless for a while longer. Every second day she went to church to beg forgiveness for her unruly, rebellious wishes, and at the same time to place herself at the disposition of the Virgin in the hope that Her mercy and forbearance would endure a while longer. The effort involved in this celestial balancing act required such concentration from her that she left the church in a haze of thought, her brow furrowed and showing off a little wrinkle just above her nose. Her veil was ever so slightly disarranged, as she had pushed it back a little when she knelt down to pray. Her maid, Marie, would ordinarily have reminded her of this small lapse, but knew her mistress well, and knew too what was going through her mind. It had been Marie, in fact, who had taught her those little tricks that were helping to make Isabelle's husband so increasingly concerned. A small wrinkle and a veil askew were perhaps enough to inspire a painter, but not in themselves sufficient to have such a devastating effect on a man's soul, so some other explanation must be sought. For Olivier, standing nearby, felt as though some immensely powerful beast had torn at his breast, sucking the very life from him. He gasped in shock, but fortunately no one heard him. So intense was the sentiment, that he had to sit down on the steps and remain there, staring long after the receding form had disappeared from view. And when he stood up, his legs shaking, his brow damp with sweat even though it was still morning and not yet hot, he knew that his life had changed forever. He did no work for days. Thus began a tale of the doomed love between a poet and a young girl which was to lead to such a calamitous and cruel ending. * * *

* * Perhaps it was her youthful beauty? Julien Barneuve thought so, at least when he first read the account of this fateful encounter, elaborated through the years and finally set down with all the romance that hindsight can offer around 1480, nearly a century and a half later. The pedigree of the anecdote was always suspect, seeming too close to Petrarch's encounter with his Laura to be comfortable. But it had tradition behind it, as well as one of Olivier's finest verses, the ten-line poem begins (in the wholly inadequate 1865 translation of Frederic Mistral) 'My eyes have stabbed my soul.' And the essence was surely true, for Olivier's dreadful fate a few years later when he fell into the hands of Isabelle's husband could not be contradicted. If he had not loved her, why would he have killed her and been attacked himself in such a way? For Olivier was tainted with madness, it seemed; the story recounted how the girl had wished to go with her husband to flee the plague and the poet begged her to stay in Avignon, that they might die in each other's arms. And when she refused, he killed her, unable to let her go. The deed revealed his secret, and he was set upon by the comte de Frjus's hirelings in revenge, beaten, and his tongue and hands cut. Olivier was, quite literally, silenced, his voice forever quietened. He could no longer talk, write, or even make signs so that others could understand him well. More still, the outraged and humiliated husband had destroyed all but a few of his poems. No-one could now tell whether his poetry, for which he was beginning to become known, was

indeed the first flowering of a literary Renaissance, the model beside which Petrarch ranked a lowly second, or merely appeared so to those few who had read his worst during his life. Only a dozen or so remained, not enough to captivate a man like Barneuve until he came across some documents in the Vatican library on a cold day in February 1928 while going through the papers of Cardinal Annibaldus di Ceccani, a collector of manuscripts and the poet's first and only patron. It was the first section of a twenty-page manuscript in Olivier's hand which kept Julien awake at night in excitement, when he finally made the connection and understood its importance. According to Manlius. A brief sentence which meant nothing to most people, but all the world to him. In a moment of jest he said it was worth selling his soul for. * * * * The writings Olivier passed down were begun by Manlius Hippomanes over a series of months at his villa a dozen leagues outside Vaison, some sixty kilometres to the northeast of Avignon. Writings is the wrong word, perhaps, for like many men in his position Manlius rarely wrote himself, although he could do so quite easily if he chose. He dictated, rather, and his words were taken down by an amanuensis, his adopted son, whose life was made unreasonably difficult because of the speed at which his master spoke. Syagrius and amiable young man of some twenty-three years who worked hard to make the best of his good fortune had to scribble to keep up, then work long into the night to decipher his markings when preparing the fine copy. And no mistakes were tolerated; his master had a good memory and the highest opinion possible of his own prose, and could be punitive if so much as a word was changed. Besides, Syagrius desired nothing so much as to please, and attract a word or two of praise. What he dictated, that so excited Barneuve, was a digest of philosophy, cut down and reduced to its essentials for dissemination among his circle and perhaps, should opinion be favorable, beyond that. Few now had any familiarity with such matters and must drink their wine watered to make it palatable. After it had been read, and if it was found suitable, he might pay a copyist for up to a hundred versions perhaps fifty would now be more than sufficient which he would send throughout Gaul, to his friends. Manlius was a host that evening; as he worked, the sun set so gently, leaving a rosy hue in the sky, and the first hints of cooling air began to blow through the open courtyard that was used as a dining room in summer. Some of the party outside began composing verses to amuse themselves and show off their learning. It used to be a regular occurrence amongst them; for Manlius had always surrounded himself with the cultivated, the men of learning whom he understood and who understood him. He had done so all his life, it was his duty and often his pleasure, especially when he could patronize the worthy, or give entertainment to friends of equal rank. Courtesy required that he play the part of the charming host at dinner as he had done countless times in his past, and he did his duty, even though he had little taste for it that evening. He conformed, as always, to the wisdom of Varro, that the number of guests should be more than the Graces and less than the Muses; he took trouble to ensure they were neither too eloquent, nor yet too silent; discreetly directed the conversation so that, although not trivial, it was not too ponderous, with readings to match. And he accomplished with ease that most delicate task of being free from meanness in his provision of food, without trying to impress his guests with its expense. Despite his efforts, though, it was not a happy occasion, as it was becoming increasingly hard to assemble even a small group of like-minded spirits. Half the guests were clients, dependant on his favour and keen to eat the dishes of larks and partridges, carp and trout he had ordered, but too ill at ease in such illustrious surroundings to make easy conversation. His adopted son, Syagrius, watching carefully, fearful of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing, ate clumsily, blushing with embarrassment and said nothing. And there were two true friends, Lucontius and Felix, who tried to make things easier, but instead ended up dominating the conversation, interrupting when others tried to speak, being unnecessarily contemptuous of the clients and overly familiar with Manlius himself. And then there was Caius Valerius, a cousin of Felix's whom Manlius tolerated only because of his friend, a coarse man, wrapped in a piety like a suffocating blanket which only partly concealed his ill humour and vulgarity. The three friends set the tone, swapping verse and epigram in the manner of the golden age, bathing themselves in the metres and resonances of the great authors they had revered since they were schoolboys. It was Lucontius who introduced the lapse in taste rare for him that made the evening so much less than agreeable. Yet now the breath of the Academy blow the winds of the church of Christ. Elegant, witty, refined. Felix smiled briefly and even Manlius barely managed to suppress a nod of approval. But Caius Valerius turned dark with anger. 'I consider there are some things at least which should be above jest.' 'Was I jesting?' responded Lucontius in mock surprise, for he realised that Caius was slow-witted enough to be unable to distinguish between respect and mockery. 'Surely I speak only the truth? Surely we see the Revelations of Our Lord solely through Greek eyes? Even Saint Paul was a Platonist.' 'I do not know what you mean,' Caius replied. 'The truth is told to me in the Bible. I need no Greek words to tell

me what I see there. 'Should Manlius intervene, explain how there are many ways of understanding even a simple passage? Teach him how such mysteries as the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit were given shape in our minds through the teaching of the Academies? Caius was one of those who glorified in his ignorance, called his lack of letters purity, scorned any subtlety of thought or expression. A man for his time, indeed. Once, and not so long ago, he would have fallen silent in embarrassment at his lack of knowledge; now it was the knowledgeable who had to mind their tongues. 'And you must remember, dear Lucontius', Manlius interrupted, 'that there are many who consider that Plato had access to the wisdom of Moses, that he merely translated Our Lord's wisdom into Greek, not the other way around.' He looked anxiously, and saw that Lucontius, dear sensitive soul, took the warning, flashing a brief apology with his eyes. The moment of difficulty was over, the dinner continued, harmlessly and without point. Except that Manlius was discomfited. He took care in his invitations, actively sought to exclude from his circle crude and vulgar men like Caius Valerius. But they were all around; it was Manlius who lived in a dream world, and his bubble of civility was becoming smaller and smaller. Caius Valerius, powerful member of a powerful family, had never even heard of Plato. A hundred, even fifty years before, such an absurdity would have been inconceivable. Now it was surprising if such a man did know anything of philosophy, and, even if it was explained, he would not wish to understand. Manlius thought greatly of such matters after most of the guests had gone to their beds, escorted by servants with torches. He stared out of the great doors at the landscape beyond, once a park of perfection, now disfigured by the rough cottages of farmers whose dwellings were coming ever closer, huddling nearer his huge villa for protection like piglets around a sow. He could have razed them, but feared their inhabitants might take themselves off, go and find a new lord to protect them one who would not honour the law if he demanded them back. Then he looked the other way, to the bathhouse now abandoned and turned into a barracks for the soldiers permanently needed to protect the estate. All they wanted was to live in security, and all the harm they did was to spoil his view. A man like Caius Valerius was very much more dangerous. 'None of us truly chooses our family, I'm afraid.' It was Felix who had walked up quietly behind him. 'People like my dear cousin have always existed; even Vergil, I believe, had a brother-in-law who despised his poetry.' Manlius put his arm around him, and they walked slowly in the fading light. Of all the creatures in the world, Felix was the one he truly loved, whose company made him relax and forget his cares. For years now, decades even, he had relied on this short powerful man, whose mind was as quick as his frame was bulky. A deceptive man, for he looked as he was a soldier, used to the hardships of fighting, and the simplicities of armies. Yet at the same time, he was supple in argument, quick in understanding, and the most honourable, loyal friend Manlius had ever encountered. Nor did he ever condemn; while Manlius frequently heard himself making waspish comments on others, Felix never judged always sought to see the good even in those who had so little of any virtue in them. 'I know,' Manlius replied. 'And I tolerate him for your sake. But, truly it is a hard job.' 'Rude, vulgar and scarcely lettered. I know. But a great donor to the church and someone who has dispatched men from his own estates to help defend Clermont from the Goths. As have I.' 'But I haven't, even though Sidonius is one of my oldest friends? Is that how you wish to end your sentence?' Martins added. It had been preying on his mind greatly in the past few months. The city of Clermont, far to the west, was under siege from King Euric, blocking his desire to grab a stranglehold on the whole of Provence. If it fell, they would all soon follow, and it could not last long without reinforcements; indeed it might already have fallen had it not been for Sidonius, who had put himself at the head of the defences and was refusing to accept the inevitable. For inevitable it was, in Manlius's view. For years now, the barbarians had been moving into Gaul; sometimes they were encouraged, sometimes resisted. Sometimes they were treated as enemies, sometimes as allies against a still worse danger. But every time they took a little bit more, and every time the power of Rome to stop them proved a mirage. Not many years ago, an army of thirty thousand had been sent against Euric's father: none had come back. His own father had conceived the great strategy of the Emperor Majorian to beat back the threat, but was undermined and killed by his enemies among the Roman aristocracy of Gaul even before any army could move. Now here was Sidonius, brave, foppish, foolish Sidonius, who had decided to take a stand where emperors had failed. He had always had a weakness for lost causes, for grand, heroic but pointless gestures. 'I had another letter from him begging our help,' Felix continued. 'He says that a few thousand troops now could make all the difference.' 'He said that six months ago as well. It made no difference at all. Has something now changed?' Felix shrugged his shoulders wearily. 'We must try, surely? The whole of the civilised world is at stake.' Manlius smiled. 'We are the civilised world, you and I,' he said. 'A few dozen people, with our learning. As long as we continue to stroll through my garden arm in arm, civilisation will

continue. Euric or no Euric. And I fear that you may provoke worse anger than you imagine.'Felix shook his head. 'You would not have spoken so cravenly a few years ago.'"A few years ago everything was different.

When I was young we could travel without fear along well-maintained roads, through well-administered cities and stay at the villas of friends stocked with labour. There was an emperor who wielded real power rather than being a plaything of warlords. Those days are as distant now as the age of Augustus."It is peaceful enough here."All illusion, my friend. We have been attacked by marauders at this villa three times in the last six weeks. It nearly fell to looters on the last occasion. Two of my other villas have been destroyed and now produce nothing. The tranquil scene you see here this evening depends on six hundred troops hidden in the background. They consume near a third of everything we produce and could turn on us one day. There are fewer people to tend the fields, fewer still to buy our diminishing surplus. In a way, we are under siege here as well, and slowly losing the battle, just as friend Sidonius is losing his. You must know all this from your own experience."I do, of course.' Felix paused, and they walked some more before sitting at the edge of the pond. `And I am grateful to you for inviting me, as ever. I, too, grow lonely for company, even though I am surrounded by people.'Manlius leaned over and kissed his friend on the cheek.

'It is good to see you once more. But however restorative, that is not the sole reason I invited you, of all people. I need to tell you something. Something important.'It was the moment, when he had to test a friendship which had endured for nearly twenty years without argument, without dispute, with perfect amity in all spheres. Manlius was aware that he was trespassing on something sacred.Felix turned towards him, drew his arm away. 'Such gravity and seriousness! Whatever can it be? You are publishing your letters at last?'This is not for laughing. I have been thinking as you have for some time. That we must try. That all we value may indeed be destroyed but it should not be given up so easily. I have received a letter from Bishop Faustus of Riez."Good heavens! You are going to pray! You are going to start going to church! Truly, this man is a saint and a miracle worker. All that I hear about him must be true.'Manlius grunted, and for a while they talked about the pond they were sitting beside, clogged now with weeds. They swapped aphorisms about water, played with quotations from Pliny about his garden, inverting grammatical constructions so that the neatness and order of the original became the clogged and unkempt reality of the present. Then, as old friends do, they said nothing, but looked at the lilies still growing and the insects hopping across them in the evening light.'Faustus wrote to ask me to become Bishop of Vaison,' Manlius said eventually.Felix knew immediately the importance of what he said, but still tried to cover it over with a joke. `Not Bishop of Rome? How about emperor, too? You'd look handsome in the purple. Truly, the man doesn't know you very well, or he wouldn't have wasted his ink.'Manlius threw some dust into the water and watched it float as the perch swam towards it in the hope of food.'I have decided to accept,' he said quietly.