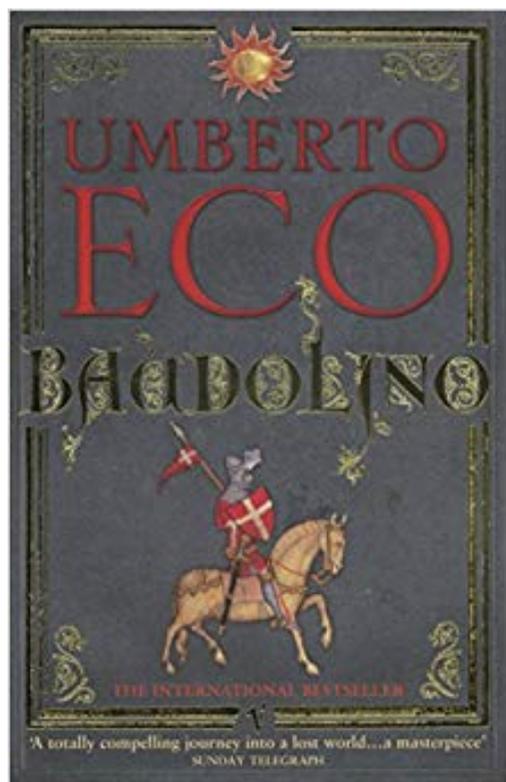


Baudolino by Umberto Eco



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An extraordinary epic, brilliantly-imagined, new novel from a world-class writer and author of the name of the rose discover the middle ages with baudolino - a wondrous, dazzling, beguiling tale of history, myth and invention it is 1204, and constantinople is being sacked and burned by the knights of the fourth crusade amid the carnage and confusion baudolino saves a byzantine historian and high court official from certain death at the hands of the crusading warriors, and proceeds to tell his own fantastical story



Reviews of the Baudolino by Umberto Eco

Uickabrod

[Sorry this is so long. To skip to the part about the book itself scroll down the words "the story in the book".]

This book is set in the time from the lead-in to the Third Crusade (1187-1192), in which a European force tried unsuccessfully to retake Jerusalem from the Muslim forces which had retaken the city in 1187, through the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), in which the Doge of Venice found

a way to hijack the European army, which had been intended to reconquer Jerusalem by capturing Alexandria in Egypt (Venice's trading partner) and moving up the coast to expel the Muslims, and instead have it attack Constantinople (Venice's trading rival) and destroy the center of the Eastern Roman Empire, which had survived for almost 800 years - through almost unimaginable crises of external threats and internal misrule and foolishness - after the 476, the date normally (and arbitrarily) given for the fall of the West.

The Mediterranean world of that time was a complex and unstable one. The Muslim political entities of West Asia and North Africa were militarily powerful when unified, but were prone to internal power struggles that erupted into civil wars. The Eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire was reduced to Anatolia, Thrace, and the Balkans, but over the preceding couple of centuries had recovered from military and economic weakness to become the major military and commercial power in the eastern Mediterranean. It had started to decline again, due to the power of the rich aristocrats and a series of disastrous emperors who diverted money away from the military and entered into trade agreements with the Venetian and Genoese city-states. The Normans, super warriors who had emerged from northwestern Europe around the turn of the millennium, had seized substantial parts of western France, conquered the Saxon kingdom in England, and then evicted the Byzantines from southern Italy and the Arabs from Sicily. The Norman kingdom of Sicily turned into a powerhouse that threatened to conquer the Byzantines but it faded and was absorbed into the Holy Roman Empire in the late 12th century.

The action then switched to several frontiers. Italy became a battleground between the Papacy, which was a major temporal power, as well as the center of religious legitimacy in the West, and the Holy Roman Emperors, who were German nobles and who traced the legitimacy of their claim to be "Roman" emperors back to Charlemagne, who was crowned as Roman emperor in 800 by the then-Pope, who was in a political battle for power with the Byzantines and who took advantage of the occupancy of the Eastern throne by a woman (the Empress Irene) to declare that - since a woman obviously could not be emperor - the imperial throne was vacant and to arrogate to himself the power to appoint someone (here a Frankish ruler) to fill it. The popes wound up like many people who had gotten what they wished for and had to fight for the temporal power they had seized for themselves in central Italy against the temporal power of the "emperors" they had granted themselves the power to appoint.

Meanwhile in the East, the back-and-forth battles between the Byzantines and the Muslims were not going well for the former. The rebuilt Byzantine power had resisted an Arab siege of Constantinople, destroyed the threat from the Slavs and Bulgars in the Balkans, and pushed far into the territories seized from it by the Muslims. The empire was shining with military power, economic might, and cultural dominance.

Until it wasn't. The oligarchs had become very powerful. Although Arab power had waned, a new Muslim power appeared, the Seljuk Turks, who appeared in Western Asia out of the steppes. They wandered into Anatolia on their way to fight with the Mamlukes of Egypt (somehow the Eastern Romans always did badly when someone was on the way to Egypt) and the emperor at the time, a good general, thought that he could protect his borders from their raids and establish his legitimacy against the challenges of the oligarchs by chasing the Turks away with his army. Unfortunately for him (and the empire) it didn't work out that way. He was defeated in battle due to the treachery of his oligarch co-commander and the Turks decided to stay in Anatolia instead of going down to Egypt. They gradually began seizing territory and displacing the farmers and herdsman who had lived there. The Turks captured Jerusalem and began to bar Christian pilgrims from visiting and worshipping there.

The Eastern emperor, who was watching Anatolia be eaten up by the Turks and saw his own empire in peril, sent to the Pope for help, citing the oppression of the Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem. Help, in the form of the First Crusade, arrived. (See above about getting what you wish for.) The Crusades went - far from smoothly - through Byzantine territory - down to the Middle East. The crusaders made (and ignored) promises to the Eastern Emperor about restoring conquered territory

in the Middle East to the Empire and eventually reached and seized Jerusalem. They established a series of small states along the coast of the Levant. These were eventually destroyed by the Muslims, hence the later crusades.

Meanwhile, back in Italy, the city-states were arising and entering into a state of Hobbesian war of all upon all.

And, of course, the intellectual life of the time was largely religious and had to do with fine-tuning the meaning of the Christian Trinity.

The story in the book is on its surface the picaresque narrative of an Italian peasant (Baudolino) who is befriended (more or less adopted) by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1122 - 1190), who died in the Third Crusade. Baudolino is an admitted liar and therefore an Unreliable Narrator. He goes back and forth in his unreliable narration. He accompanies the Emperor on the Third Crusade and winds up back in Constantinople (which he accurately describes as an indescribably large, prosperous, and beautiful city on the eve of the Fourth Crusade). He is a witness to the savagery of the sack of that city by the crusade and has the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates (who he rescues from death by plundering crusaders in the Hagia Sophia) as a friend and audience for his tales.

Baudolino travels East from Constantinople in search of the kingdom of Prester John, the legendary Christian ruler of a distance Asian land, and narrates his exotic adventures.

Since Baudolino is established as unreliable and willing to lie to serve or subvert those he speaks with, his stories are all suspect though presented in loving detail. I don't know any more powerful description of the looting of Constantinople, which went from a monument and museum of a culture that reached back through Ancient Roman times and was turned into a smoking ruin, with centuries-old treasures melted into bullion or stolen, than this (not to mention the outrages inflicted on its people). What Eco seems most interested in is giving us a sense of how strange and contingent to modern minds the supposedly hidebound and doctrinaire medieval mind was. Everyone is debating theology, medieval understandings of ancient science, art, and rules of conduct.

But the problem with such a post-modern approach to such a complex historical, political, religious, philosophical, military, etc. narrative is that the narrative eventually disappears under the weight it must carry. The last part of the book is a voyage to the land of Prester John with its extraordinary people and creatures out of medieval and ancient narratives but by then we've become so overloaded that it's hard to follow along.

Eventually Eco decided that the book is really a murder mystery about how Barbarossa died but he can't put any suspense into the question because of the giant mass of narrative he has surrounded it with.

Technically, the book (at least in English) is a failure. It is so dense and discursive and so full of dead-end narratives, shaggy-dog stories, and meaningless details that it is almost impossible to follow. It also lacks a central narrative that could make the effort of following it worthwhile.

Yet, if you can cast yourself loose from any commitment to making narrative, moral, historical, character developmental, or any other kind of sense of the book, it offers a kind of seductive bath in striking images and rich descriptions. Eco is Baudolino, a totally unreliable narrator with extraordinarily rich but probably false detail.

If you know the history and the intellectual battles and the literature of the time, this is a way to play with those ideas and see a clever manipulation of them. If you are looking for a real narrative or even the somewhat strange mystery of *Romance of the Rose*, this will be a disappointing book.

Dusar

This is not a book review, but just a brief note on the latest printing: judging by the paper (the sort of extra-white, somewhat heavy-weight), this is definitely a print-on-demand. The paper quality reminds of me of some academic books, and I find it rather less than pleasing in a literary paperback. That said, the printing quality is crisp and clear, and the glued binding seems solid enough. I bought this as a light reading for travel, but actually the weight of the Pbk might be a factor.

*

I've read *The Name of the Rose* & loved Foucault's *Pendulum*, and having recently read Binet's *The Seventh Function of Language* I got a craving for something Eco-ish. It's been ages since I've read any fiction by Eco, so we'll see how it lives up to his intricate, historical-fact-studded novels.

(More to come)

Questanthr

This is my favorite book. I've listened to it several times, but I never read it. So I am now. Eco was a great author and does medieval settings better than anyone I've read. He knew his stuff! If you're a medievalist, you have to read this.

The characters, especially Baudolino, are great. The storyline is sprawling and epic at times. Like *A Princess Bride*, it has everything. :)

Coron

Umberto Eco is a brilliant individual, an outstanding author, and he possesses a bounty of knowledge related to the the field of semiotics. That said, if *The Name of the Rose* is a 10/10, and the *Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* is an 8.5/10, Baudolino is *only* a 7/10.

The book is several parts Eco weaving history and fiction together (and well, I might add), mixed with one part of utter and complete weirdness. If this was the peak of Eco's weirdness, I'd be fine with it, but evaluating it in retrospect (having recently read *The Prague Cemetery*), I can see that this book represents the point at which Eco started his slide into the deep end of the crazy pool.

Read Baudolino. Enjoy it. But if you do, remember what I said when you progress onto Eco's most recent work (*The Prague Cemetery*).

Black_Hawk_Down

I've found Umberto Eco to be a wonderful writer, and while I did enjoy Baudolino, and Eco's interesting exploration of Truth, I didn't find this to be the best of his works. Still definitely worth the time, but if you've not read him before, you may want to first check out *The Name of the Rose*, which is one of his finest.

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