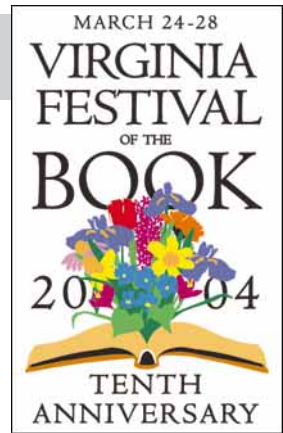


Ruled Britannia by Harry Turtledove recommended by Steve White

A program of the Virginia Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Steve White—author of eleven novels, most recently *The Shiva Option* (with David Weber) and *Forge of the Titans*—recommends *Ruled Britannia* by Harry Turtledove. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



What if Hitler had carried it off? What if the Confederate States of America had carried it off? Napoleon? Julian the Apostate? Xerxes?

This kind of question forms the starting point for alternate history, a sub-genre of science fiction in which the science is sociology and the fiction consists of assuming variant outcomes to historical turning points and projecting the consequences into an imagined present day.

Author Harry Turtledove is widely recognized as the king of alternate history. With *Ruled Britannia*, he strengthens his claim to the throne.

The premise is one of the old favorites, especially among British writers: what if the Spanish Armada had carried it off? The novel therefore came to me with one strike against it, for this premise is one which I simply cannot buy. The Armada's plan of campaign was so fundamentally flawed that, in the words of one historian, Horatio Nelson couldn't have led it to victory. But Turtledove proceeded to disarm me with a forthright author's note admitting that he is describing an extremely low-probability event... and inviting us to have fun with it anyway.

And have fun he does. We find ourselves in the Spanish-occupied London of 1597, in the company of none other than William Shakespeare, busily at work on plays like *Love's*

Labor Won and *If You Like It*. Some may find it implausible that the English theatre would have still been functioning under such a regime. But, in fact, there was a theatre in Spain too, exemplified by Shakespeare's almost exact contemporary Lope de Vega, who in the real world sailed with the Armada as a junior officer.

In Turtledove's world, he is assigned to keeping an eye on the London theatrical scene for subversive tendencies—especially those of his friend Master Shakespeare. (Bringing these two literary titans together is the sort of idea that leaves one wondering why nobody has ever thought of it before.)

In the meantime, Shakespeare has been made an offer he can't refuse: to write a play celebrating the life of Philip II of Spain. His complicated life becomes even more complicated when he is simultaneously dragooned into a conspiracy to produce a play about the ancient British heroine Boudicca, in an effort to spark an uprising against the Spanish oppressors....

As always, Turtledove's depth of historical research inspires awe. (Alone among alternate history writers, he is aware that Philip II's aim was to bestow the English crown on his daughter.) So does his ability to produce lengthy passages of high-quality Shakespearean pastiche. (Quotation is futile, as there are so many lines in this book that cry out for it.) And he avoids the standard alternate-historical fallacy

of assuming that the change-point he describes would have permanently stopped the pendulum of history. (He gives the Spanish occupation of England nine years—generously, in my opinion.)

But above and beyond all that, and despite the sometimes grim and bloody events it describes, the novel is funny. Laugh-out-loud-so-as-to-alarm-your-family-and-friends funny. If you liked the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, you'll love this.

Virginia Festival of the Book

145 Ednam Drive • Charlottesville, VA • 22903-462
434.924.3296 • vabook@virginia.edu • <http://www.vabook.org>