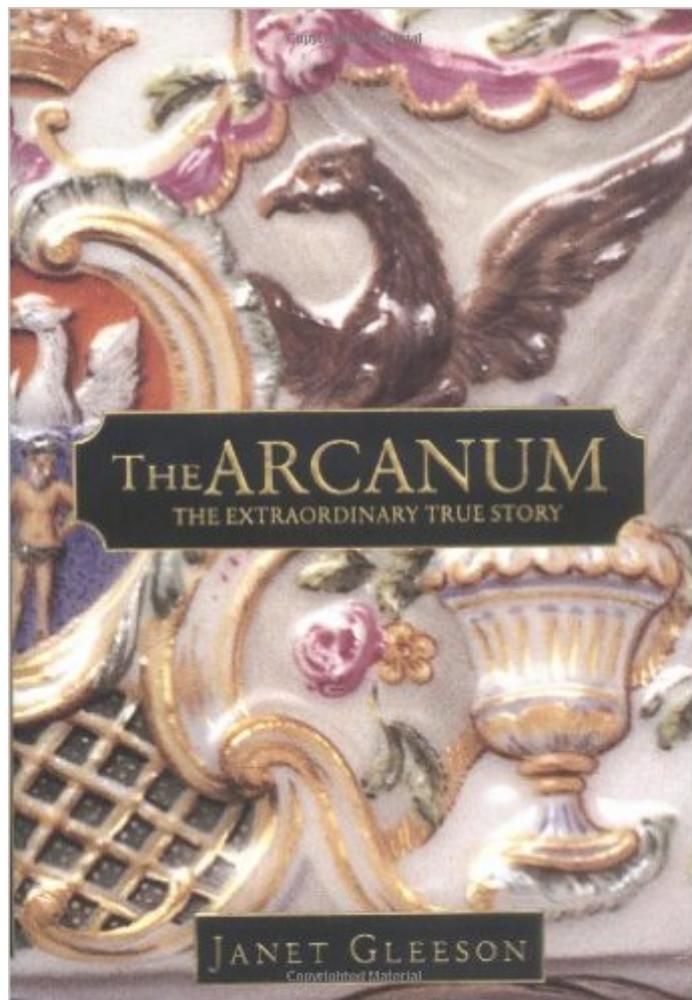


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The Arcanum: The Extraordinary True Story



Synopsis

The arcanum--the recipe to make gold--was mankind's legendary quest since the Age of Reason. By the early 18th century, however, porcelain began to rival gold in value. Gleeson recounts the true story of Johann Friedrich Bottger, an alchemist, who, at the cost of his own life, discovered how to make porcelain and changed the course of history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is one of those 'can't-put-downable' real-life true stories where the truth is stranger than fiction, and in Janet Gleeson's capable hands (or under her capable pen) the story, in all its astounding details unfolds beautifully. Gleeson does rate as one of my favourite authors and she does have the knack of picking out incredibly interesting stories that are peopled with the most astonishing cast of characters. In this case it is the search for the 'recipe' for porcelain, the Arcanum as it was called. It was one of the great mysteries for eighteenth century Europe - the discovery of how it was made was on a par with discovering the philosopher's stone - or the recipe to turn base metals into gold. And in fact the book starts off with a charlatan alchemist (Johann Frederick Bottger) who claims he has discovered this recipe or arcanum. Unfortunately Bottger becomes a prisoner of his wealthy patron who realises that he is worth more as a captive working for him, than as a free-agent roaming around. Forced to experiment Bottger inadvertently stumbles across the arcanum for Porcelain. Gleeson then shows the lives of other men such as Johan Gregor Herold, an ambitious artist, developed colors and patterns of unparalleled brilliance at the newly established Meissen

Porcelain Manufacture; and Johann Joachim Kaendler, a virtuoso sculptor who used the Meissen porcelain to invent a new art form. The story is one of greed, incredible artistry and innovation and all set against the political ambitions of a warlike and ever-changing European landscape. Gleeson's true skill is in the way she draws out the detail to people the landscape with lifelike and realistic detail without cluttering us with dull information or specious descriptions. She is immensely readable, bringing the story and the people alive.

Who ever thought a book about porcelain could be so engrossing? Ms. Gleeson has written an exciting (yes....exciting!), fascinating tale. It is a combination of science and adventure with some industrial espionage thrown in. The biographical aspects are excellent also. You get a real feel for the personalities who are portrayed in this book: the profligate king (Augustus) who is desperate for a way to finance his out-of-control spending, so he pins his hopes on alchemy!; the teenage alchemist (Johann Bottger) who draws attention to himself with a magic trick that fools people into thinking he has found a way to create gold, and thereby gets himself locked away by Augustus until he can duplicate the feat! But Bottger was no charlatan. He really thought he could do it.... The tension builds as Augustus invests lots of money in Bottger's enterprise but starts to get impatient when he doesn't see any results.... Poor Bottger even manages to escape for a short while because he is afraid of being executed for his failure. Eventually, he saves himself by coming up with a commercially viable formula for porcelain.... but it wasn't easy! This is a relatively brief book but it is filled with many interesting characters besides the two mentioned above and the action moves around to various cities as people who have worked with Bottger try to smuggle out the secret formula and shop it around to other kings and princes..... A very enjoyable (and educational!) book.

I picked this up at a bookstall at Heathrow last week, started it and literally couldn't put it down until the end. Wow! I don't think I've given the history of porcelain five seconds' thought in my life, but while I was reading The Arcanum nothing could have struck me as more fascinating. Janet Gleeson is a born storyteller - and who'd 'a thunk *that* with a background in writing collectors' guides for porcelain and posters? Hello Hollywood - here's a movie waiting to be made! Sex, danger, intrigue, discovery, war, politics, envy, gluttony - hey, all seven deadly sins and then some. As God is my witness, I'll never ignore porcelain again!

I didn't know what to expect when I picked up a copy of The Arcanum in a bookstore at the airport. I needed something to read on a four hour flight, and Janet Gleeson's book definitely fit the bill: it kept

my attention for the whole four hours. The capsule on the back cover was what really caught my attention. It promised eccentric kings, dungeons and avarice of all kinds. The book did not disappoint! It's as much an entertaining look at how small things make a big difference in history as it is a factual and well-presented history of the introduction of porcelain manufacture in Europe. Gleeson did her homework, and that enabled her to bring to life a cast of character that might have come out of the most imaginative of novels. Almost before our eyes we can see the Augustus' obsession with porcelain, and finding a way to manufacture it, drive events in European history. We see a young and desperate alchemist/charlatan who couldn't have gotten himself in more trouble if he tried. Gleeson weaves these, and other, figures and their strange tale into a history that reads almost like a novel. If you enjoy Barbara Tuchman's books, I suspect that you'll like Janet Gleeson's, as well. Aside from the fascinating story, Gleeson provides a technical discussion of the substance of porcelain ware and its manufacture that should appeal to novice and expert alike. I enjoyed this book immensely; it gave the reader the whole package. I recommend it without reservation and I'll definitely be looking to read more books by this author.

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