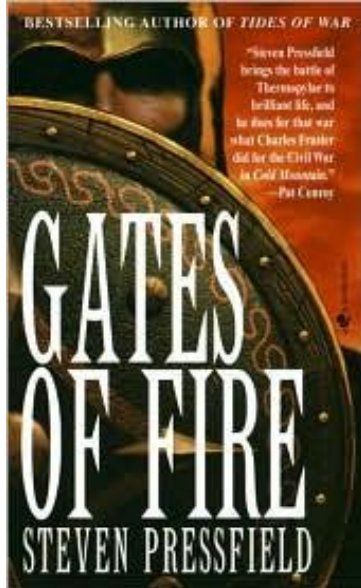


GATES OF FIRE

A review by Rich Barbuto

This book is so hot I don't know where to begin. A retired marine infantryman recommended it to me and I trusted his judgment so I jumped in. Now, please understand that I maintain an extensive waiting list of military history, historical fiction, and science fiction books so it is a concession on my part to move some book up in the queue. Am I glad I did! Did *Starship Troopers* make an impact on you? Did the notions of what it means to be a citizen, the brotherhood of warriors, the rendition of space age warfare, and the graphic descriptions of blasting bugs to kingdom come leave a lasting impression? Let me tell you, *Gates of Fire* is of the same genre and takes a back seat to no book of the same class.



Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire* (ISBN 0-553-58053-1) is historical fiction of the very highest caliber. It is the story of Thermopylae as told by Xeones, a non-Spartan squire to a Spartan warrior. The mechanism for getting into the story is fascinating in itself. It seems that this squire is the only survivor of the Spartan force. Xerxes, is surprised that a slender force of Hellenes, led by a smaller body of Spartans and their king, has slain tens of thousands of his warriors and held up his advance for three vital days. He is curious about the nature of the Greek warriors. Fearing death, as all men do, what possessed them to fight on to certain death despite numerous opportunities to withdraw? Xerxes orders his doctors to save the grievously-wounded Xeones and to bring him before the throne to inform Xerxes of these incomparable Spartan warriors.

Xeones agrees to talk and he begins his tale with the events which brought him, a freeman and teenager, to Sparta and into the service of a Spartan officer. Xeones tells of Spartan life, social organization, warrior training, civic virtue, relationship with the Helots, the slave class. As he moves from field worker to squire, he sees the warrior ethos first-hand, largely through his relationship with Spartan teens struggling for the status of adult citizen-warrior admission into the line of battle.

His tale is gripping. The many characters come to life. We meet Leonidas, who appears to all non-Spartans to be just another warrior, older than most perhaps. But despite wearing no emblems of rank, he exerts a powerful, irresistible force upon his countrymen. He shares their hardships, as do all his officers. Then there is Dieneke, who Herodotus tells us was undaunted by the Persian capacity to literally block out the sun with volleys of arrows. "Good. Then we'll have our battle in the shade." The plight of Rooster, the Helot who can not accept his status as a slave, is remarkable. Polynikes, Olympic hero, warrior hero, is a study of fame, pride, ambition, wrapped in selfless service. Why is Xeones the squire found on the battlefield in the armor of a Spartan officer?



The situations are captivating. The descriptions of hand-to-hand combat so graphic that it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand upright. Reading about the Spartan understanding of what makes men fight and what makes them fight so very effectively is illuminating. Pressfield's rendition of "soldier talk", how an NCO talks to his men crudely and colorfully, reminded me of my military experiences. The Spartan understanding of battle psychology is insightful and clearly gave them the edge over their foes, especially those good citizen-warriors of the other Greek city-states. The Spartan diplomacy of uniting the disparate Greeks in their opposition to Xerxes two million strong army and navy is fascinating. The Spartans literally beat a dozen Greek armies to enlist them into the anti-Persian alliance.

There are numerous "quotable passages." I will relate one which I found particularly striking in describing the difference between the Spartans and the rest of the Greek warriors. After the first day's fight, the Greeks prepared themselves for the next day's battle. The Thespians, who had fought exceptionally well, decided that they would not shine up their armor as they had done the first day to awe the enemy with the golden reflected sunlight. Instead, they would leave the dried blood and gore on their shields and body armor, in fact, add to it. Their bloody red shields would clearly show the enemy soldier what he had to look forward to. The rest of the Greeks, thrilled at having survived the first day and understanding that the odds were against their being alive much longer, followed the ghoulish Thespian example. "The Spartans alone abstained, not out of delicacy or decorum, but simply in obedience to their own laws of campaign, which command them to adhere without alteration to their customary discipline and practices of arms."



Clearly, the Spartans were professional soldiers while their allies were citizen soldiers. The Spartan, Pressfield tells us, could not separate being a warrior from being a citizen. He fought as a member of a team, willing to sacrifice all for the good of the state. He trained hard, fought harder, obeyed his officers, and kept his fears tightly locked up inside of him. The parallels with Starship Troopers are undeniable. The affirmation of the warrior spirit is greatly satisfying.

There are very few books that I can truly say I regretted putting down even for a moment but this is one of them. I wanted to read quickly because I wanted to know what happened next. I wanted to read slowly because I wanted the satisfaction to last forever. The sub-plots revolving around the central theme are most entertaining. The twists and turns are unanticipated. The author's language is descriptive and a pure pleasure to read. This is one story I will return to repeatedly. Let me add for any of you ancient period gamers, that the description of the Battle of

Thermopylae will have you gaming that event again with new insights and enthusiasm. But let me say that even you non-ancient period wargamers will find so much that is entertaining that you may consider trying out the Greek-Persian wars. Well, enough from me. I would be happy to read what you folks have to say. What is your favorite part of *Gates of Fire*?