Cicero’s letters are saturated with learned philosophical allusions and arguments. This innovative study shows just how fundamental these are for understanding Cicero’s philosophical activities and for explaining the enduring interest of his ethical and political thought. Dr McConnell draws particular attention to Cicero’s treatment of Plato’s Seventh Letter and his views on the relationship between philosophy and politics. He also illustrates the various ways in which Cicero finds philosophy an appealing and effective mode of self-presentation, and a congenial, pointed medium for talking to his peers about ethical and political concerns. The book offers a range of fresh insights into the impressive scope and sophistication of Cicero’s epistolary and philosophical practice, and the vibrancy of the philosophical environment of the first century BC. A new picture emerges of Cicero the philosopher and philosophy’s place in Roman political culture.

Sean McConnell is Lecturer in Classics at the University of Otago.
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The roots of this book lie in my undergraduate days at the University of Otago, where I first came into contact with Cicero’s philosophical writings under the guidance of Jon Hall. I have to admit that at first I was somewhat underwhelmed: against the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, as a philosopher Cicero was struggling to rate. What was new? What was good? Was Cicero worth taking seriously as a first-rate philosophical thinker? With no real answers to these worries, my philosophical interests veered elsewhere, and I came to the University of Cambridge driven by a desire to study Lucretius. Soon my interests had shifted to the interaction between philosophy and politics at Rome in the first century BC, and after some years I came once more to read Cicero’s correspondence. I was immediately struck by the philosophical elements permeating the letters and began to suspect that Cicero was doing something markedly different from what one sees in his assorted dialogues and treatises. After an encouraging conversation with David Sedley, for my doctoral thesis I decided to focus on philosophy in Cicero’s correspondence. As well as a surprisingly agreeable companion, I now consider Cicero to be an engaging, insightful, and indeed innovative philosophical thinker, deserving of a wider and more appreciative audience. It is hoped that this book conveys something of Cicero’s intellectual depth and subtlety, and indeed something of his personality.

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