

Lindsey Davis: An Interview with the author of SILVER PIGS

by Ginny Lindzey

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I wrote to Lindsey Davis recently on the off chance that she might answer a few questions about her writing. I would have much preferred to have traveled to London to interview her in person but, alas, the funds just weren't available in the TCA treasury. Nevertheless, Ms. Davis was kind enough to reply, answering all of my questions, which I thought might interest and entertain you.
--Ginny Lindzey, ed.

What is your background? Where were you born and raised, educated, etc.?

I am 43 (1993); single; no children. I was born and brought up in Birmingham. I went to a good liberal girls' school then LMH, Oxford. I read English, but nearly chose History, and I had always been interested in archaeology too.

I joined the civil service, because I believed they were fair to women. I worked for the Property Services Agency--what had previously been the Ministry of Works. My various jobs included arranging contracts in connection with Ancient Monuments and the big London Museums, then five years being diplomatic as a committee secretary and Deputy Secretary's "Fixit" person. It finally struck me that my department at least was not fair to its women, and not worth fighting either, so I left. Everyone warned me that abandoning the index-linked pension was a dangerous decision.

How did you conceive of these novels?

I had always been a scribbler. A romantic novel of mine was runner up for the 1985 Georgette Heyer Historical Novel Prize, which encouraged me to forget about getting a proper job and stake everything on trying to become a writer.

It took three years. I survived on the government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme ("enterprise" is what you need to live on 40 pounds sterling a week) then by cooking lunches for a firm of tax consultants (dreaming of the day I might need a tax-efficient business plan myself). "Woman's Realm" serialised my Civil War story, and commissioned others. And eventually I had the lucky idea for Didius Falco, the Roman detective.

I set out to write "romantic" fiction, which probably shows, but in the quest for a publisher was trying to find an unusual setting. Having researched Imperial Rome, it was the city that first grabbed my attention as a classic gumshoe arena--the picture in Juvenal of somewhere terribly dangerous, packed with unscrupulous people all on the make, including "informers" whom everyone despised. Falco himself arrived in my head from who knows where? He is based on the

type, but obviously with deliberate attempts to overturn the type, plus the need to create a character who is not simply a spoof but distinctly my own.

I like your choice of the reign of Vespasian for the setting, but why did you choose it? What did you see as its advantages and disadvantages?

I happen to like [Vespasian], perhaps because he was a good administrator who rose on merit and despite being despised by the Establishment. After "I Claudius," it was safe to hope that this was one ancient period that would seem accessible to the public at large--though the 70s and 80s haven't been done to death by other writers.

It's also a good period to research because of the availability of original material. And for a Brit, the First Century holds a particular interest. Apart from the Boudiccan Rebellion, which is impossible to ignore, there is a lot of archaeological evidence, some emerging now, about the establishment of Roman Britain. The political side does interest me. (My father taught politics, so this is in the blood.)

Your characterizations are very realistic. How do you develop your characters? Do you create a person and then place him in an historical setting, or vice versa?

I'm glad my characters are real. It's true that I do sometimes use professions which seem particularly Roman, for "local color." But generally, the fact that my people are "historical" doesn't really affect how I develop them. I suppose I'm trying to say in my work that human characteristics are the one side of life that never changes. I would present people in exactly the same way if I wrote a modern novel.

How I do it must be the usual mixture of observation and imagination, though I am a particular believer in singling out details (of appearance or behaviour) and I do think that the way characters become interesting is if they are viewed through the prejudice of my protagonist(s). Which must often be my own prejudice of course. What a nice way to be rude about people "under cover"!

Your descriptions of geographical locations are wonderfully detailed. Have you traveled extensively in your research? If so, what sort of people have you met during your research and how have they helped or hindered your work?

I wrote SILVER PIGS before I had ever been to Rome, which is a tribute to all the other writers whom I had read on the subject. My publisher insisted I go there before the book was in print, and it does help tighten up descriptions. Now that I can afford it I usually try to spend a few days at least in the main location of a plot.

The people I meet are those that are generally met by a shy English girl creeping about pretending she isn't there. It is safe to assume that any portrayals of waiters, hotel-keepers, or trashy trinket-sellers may be based on personal experience!

You have a marvelous talent for describing the general filth and squalor of life in the Roman world. In fact, your frankness in specific scenes--hiding the silver pigs in a urine bucket, smuggling bits of silver in bodily orifices, or shoving a villain's face into a pile of dung--both captivates and disgusts your audience (as appropriate). To what do you attribute this talent? (living in the countryside? being brought up with a bunch of crude brothers? an extraordinarily vivid imagination?)

My talent with dung, etc., I attribute to being a soft townie. It must reflect my own terrors. My parents made a brave attempt to brainwash me into thinking the countryside is marvellous, but failed.

In presenting the Romans I feel there is a dual approach: both to show ways in which even 2000 years ago they were as civilised as us, then the ways in which life was more difficult. I want people to think about the facts that until we had cars, all town streets were full of dung, and that private plumbing is a very modern feature (except for plutocrats).

The smuggling of silver I got from an article about prisoners in modern jails. I believe this is a common practice, whether in the West or the Gulags, and I believe it would have happened on a Roman slave gang; my purpose was to show misery, and this seemed a useful example. Using a frank detail to startle the audience is a tool I regularly employ, though hopefully not simply to shock for its own sake.

What do you hope to accomplish with your novels--are they purely for entertainment or do you intend for them to be didactic in part?

I am seeking to write something people will enjoy. That's why there have to be jokes, either directly expressed by the characters, or shared privately between me and the reader. "Didactic" is a sombre word, but I do believe there is a voracious appetite for information; this for me is why historical novels are more fun than fantasy.

You don't ask whether I aim to be authentic--but of course the answer is yes. Making the known facts fit my story is part of the challenge; I could never write one of those books that end with a note saying "for the purposes of the plot I had to change the date of the Battle of Waterloo by three decades and alter who won it. . . ."

Can you give us a hint about future novels and other plans you may have? So far only SILVER PIGS and SHADOWS IN BRONZE have appeared in our area. I understand that VENUS IN COPPER is to follow--but what then?

VENUS IN COPPER should be out from Ballantine shortly; I've just seen its rather lurid cover. It's about a dubious redhead and a real estate fraud (I was buying a house at the time), and is set solidly in Rome. Then follows THE IRON HAND OF MARS, which is set in Germany, and tries to answer some of the intriguing questions at the breaking off point of the Tacitus Histories: what happened to the one-eyed rebel with the Bjorn Borg beard who dreamed of a united Europe (some hopes!), or the prophetess at the top of the tower?

The latest, which comes out here next May is POSEIDON'S GOLD--a family saga, with antiques. After that I run out of convincing metals, as I don't think the public are ready for "Electron." Syria will be the next location, and perhaps something theatrical (dancing girls, e.g.).

After five Falco books I'm still enjoying the challenge of doing the research for colourful material, and especially the unexpected scope for humour in imperial Rome. I have just moved to a new house in Greenwich which needs to be "lovingly restored" at great expense, so that's an added incentive to stick at the word processor. To my amazement the series is now published in the United States and six European countries. Even tv film rights have been sold.

This is all a far cry from the misery of commuting to my old safe job--and besides, it's the most wonderful fun.

[Currently, her other books include LAST ACT IN PALMYRA, TIME TO DEPART, A DYING LIGHT IN CORDUBA, THREE HANDS IN THE FOUNTAIN, TWO FOR THE LIONS (UK), ONE VIRGIN TOO MANY (UK), the upcoming ODE TO A BANKER, and her romance THE COURSE OF HONOUR . For more information, see her official website at www.lindseydavis.co.uk--Ginny Lindzey]