

# ROMA

by Steven Saylor

## About the Author

- A Conversation with Steven Saylor

## Historical Perspective

- “What Made the Matrons Murder?”  
An Essay by the Author

## Keep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

A  
*Reading  
Group Gold  
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions  
visit [www.readinggroupgold.com](http://www.readinggroupgold.com)



## *A Conversation with Steven Saylor*

### **What was it like to do the research for such a big project?**

Sheer pleasure. When you dive into the research required for a historical novel written on this scale, it's tremendously exciting; whole new worlds unfold as you follow one fascinating link to another, going further and further back in time to unravel the story of Rome's origins.

The research was anything but dull, because the ancient historians had a keen sense of storytelling. They wanted to keep their audience enthralled from first page to last, so the accounts they've given us are full of all the "good stuff"—tales of heroism and treachery, rape and revenge, hope and heartbreak. The people who built Rome into the greatest city on earth—warlords, slaves, vestal virgins, rabble-rousing politicians, scheming millionaires—still live for us today because the human drama of their lives still touches us.

### **How did you move beyond the research into the actual writing?**

Creating the novel presented a great challenge, given the immense sweep (a span of a thousand years), the sheer number of characters, and the huge historical and political issues involved. I chose to split the big story into a number of smaller stories set a few generations apart, linked across the centuries by following the fortunes of two of the founding families of Rome. Their personal dramas allowed me to hit the very highest points of the historical saga, episodes such as the sack of Rome by the Gauls—a humiliation the Romans never forgot or forgave—and the terrifying threat the Romans faced when Hannibal crossed the Alps with his elephants, determined to destroy Rome forever. There are several critical points when Rome might have been wiped from the face of the earth and forgotten, but

*"The ancient historians had a keen sense of storytelling."*



thanks to the gods, and the sheer determination of her citizens, Rome always survives.

**We first see the site of Rome as nothing more than a stop on a trade route, but by the end of the book it's become the world's biggest and most powerful city. How did that happen?**

Relentless military conquest was always the key to Rome's success, but so was Roman innovation. It was a man named Appius Claudius who gave Rome the world's first aqueduct, the Aqua Appia; without water from distant sources, Rome could never have grown to accommodate a million inhabitants. He also laid down the famous Appian Way, which revolutionized road building. Roman roads not only allowed armies to march across Europe, they also allowed the wealth of conquered lands (including slaves) to be brought back to the capital. Those ancient roads were so finely built that they still exist all over Europe today.

As Rome grows richer and more powerful, Roman culture becomes more sophisticated. We see the birth of the Roman theater, for example, and the importation of foreign artists and sculptors to decorate the magnificent temples that will make Rome the most opulent city on earth. As their sphere of influence expands, the Romans also begin to import exotic religions, including the infamous Cult of Bacchus, which included orgiastic rituals, and the worship of Cybele, whose priests castrated themselves. The more religiously conservative Romans begin to think the city needs a thorough cleansing, and the result is one of history's bloodiest witch hunts.

*About the  
Author*

*“The American republic has so far lasted only about half as long as did Rome’s.”*

**The details about Roman religion are eye opening. You’re also clearly fascinated by the politics of ancient Rome.**

Endlessly fascinated, because they’re still so relevant today. Rome moves from a small community of traders to a walled city ruled by kings. Then, after driving off a particularly nasty king called Tarquin—the famous rape of Lucretia causes his downfall—the upper classes establish a new form of elected government they call a republic. The kings tended to balance the interests of the have-nots against the power of the rich, but in the new republic, it’s every man for himself. The elite class, the patricians, ruthlessly stack the electoral process to favor themselves, but the unruly have-nots, the plebeians, have their own hand to play—they’re needed to harvest crops and fill the ranks of the army—so there’s a constant tug of war between the classes.

All the issues Americans deal with today in our polarized republic, the Romans dealt with first. Conservative politicians preached patriotism and religious piety and whipped up xenophobic hysteria; over and over we hear them say, “Do as your betters tell you and Rome will be safe; disobey us and your treason and sinfulness will let outsiders destroy Rome.” At the other end of the political spectrum, rabble-rousers—whether driven by idealism or personal ambition—exploited the resentment of the struggling classes. Both sides used lawsuits and sexual scandals to drag down their opponents. Doesn’t all this sound familiar?



**Yet, despite all that turmoil, the Roman Republic managed to last for almost five hundred years. Why did it finally fail?**

It was the imperial success of the Republic that doomed it. The staggering wealth brought in by foreign conquests only served to increase social and economic inequality—the poor became poorer, the rich became super-rich. And at the very top, a handful of men (like Caesar) became far too powerful. The social order was fractured and destabilized to the point of civil war, and when the wars were over, Rome essentially had a king again, the emperor Augustus. The Republic was dead, never to rise again.

The American republic has so far lasted only about half as long as did Rome's. Whether it will end with the rise of an all-powerful executive, as happened in Rome, remains to be seen. There are certainly forces at work leading us in that direction.

**What sort of characters populate the book?**

I wanted Rome itself to be the leading character of the book, which is why I've tried to include the full sweep of the city's history. But it's the people of a city we care about, and I've tried to show these momentous events through the eyes of the men and women who actually experienced them.

Perhaps my favorite character is the vestal virgin Pinaria, who becomes trapped along with a handful of defenders atop the Capitoline Hill when the Gauls conquer the city. Like all the vestals, who came from leading families, Pinaria has led a very privileged, sheltered existence, and her values are completely proper and pious. But in a world turned upside-down, this vestal virgin finds herself falling in love with a slave—something utterly unthinkable!—and she faces some wrenching choices.

*About the  
Author*

**You also include Romulus and Remus, the founders of the city. Were the twins real, or just legendary?**

No one can say for sure. Modern historians used to dismiss the twins as mere legends, but that attitude has begun to change in recent years, thanks to new archaeological discoveries in Rome that date almost exactly to the supposed era of Romulus and Remus. More and more, it appears that the basic details given to us by the ancient sources are accurate, after all.

For all the regal trappings that Romulus took on in his later years, he and his brother essentially started out as ruthless young gang leaders who raided the countryside until they eliminated all the competition. They issued an open invitation to every brigand in Italy to come join them—which is how Rome ended up with too many men and not enough women, leading to the rape (i.e., abduction) of the neighboring Sabine women. Putting up walls around the settlement of Rome—making it a proper city—was just a way to protect their loot. When you read between the lines, the story of Romulus the founder is more gritty than glorious; it has the ring of truth.

**You also tell the story of Coriolanus. His name is familiar...**

That's because Shakespeare wrote a tragedy about Coriolanus—T. S. Eliot declared it a greater play than *Hamlet*. As I researched the story, I saw what drew Shakespeare to such dramatic material. In the first years of the Republic, Rome's greatest war hero is driven to become a traitor, then marches on Rome at the head of an invincible army. Only one force on earth can stop him and save the city. The story of Coriolanus provides one of history's great twist endings.

*“When you read between the lines, the story of Romulus the founder is more gritty than glorious; it has the ring of truth.”*



### Who else is in the book?

One of the characters commits one of history's first mass murders—I don't want to give away any details, but I promise they come straight from the historical record.

Another character becomes the impresario for the first great Roman playwright, Plautus; he's also hopelessly infatuated with his boyhood friend, who happens to become the greatest of all Roman generals, Scipio Africanus, the conqueror of Hannibal.

Then there are the brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, charismatic politicians who fearlessly try to revolutionize Roman society from the bottom up—and who meet a tragic fate that may remind readers of two Irish-American brothers named Kennedy.

The last descendant in the bloodline traced by *Roma* is Lucius Pinarius, one of the three heirs named in the will of Julius Caesar. As the Republic ends and the age of the emperors begins, Lucius faces a very personal test of loyalty. Should he bow to the inevitable triumph of his despised cousin Augustus, or remain faithful to his friends, the doomed lovers Antony and Cleopatra?

### *About the Author*

*"I shall relate  
the sordid  
details just  
as they've  
been handed  
down to us."  
—Livy*

**There's a gold talisman on a necklace—an image of a god called Fascinus—that's handed down through the generations in *Roma*, linking the first characters and all their descendants. Some readers may find this talisman a bit far-fetched.**

And yet, the worship of Fascinus is one of the most authentic details in the book. The form taken by this god may indeed strike readers as unusual: Fascinus appears to the worshipper as a detached human phallus levitating in a fire, and the talisman worn by the characters is a gold image of a winged phallus.

Anyone who's been to Pompeii has seen phallic images on buildings, and museums have many examples of such amulets. To the ancients, these images weren't prurient or even sexual; they represented the god Fascinus, who protected wearers from the so-called "evil eye" or "fascination" (the word comes from Fascinus). The vestal virgins placed such an image beneath the chariot of a general when he celebrated a triumph, and phallic trinkets were widely worn, especially by women in childbirth and by infants.

Fascinis is significant because the ancestors of the Romans had no gods in the strict sense; they believed in tree spirits and such, and only later adopted the gods of others, especially the Greeks. But the very first deity of the Roman ancestors, uniquely native to Rome, may have been Fascinus, who appears in their earliest myths. That's why I put Fascinus at the heart of *Roma*—though by the end of the book, the god's talisman, worn by time, has subtly changed shape, setting the stage for a new millennium and a new era of the Eternal City.



### “What Made the Matrons Murder?” An Essay by the Author

Rome is my bread and butter. When I was a boy growing up in rural Texas, watching gladiator movies, playing with my battery-operated Roman galley, sword fighting with my brother, and dressing up as Cleopatra (just kidding!), I could never have guessed that I would someday make a living writing about ancient Rome, but so it goes.

My mystery series featuring Gordianus the Finder, sleuth of ancient Rome, is now up to twelve volumes (ten novels and two collections of short stories), translated into twenty languages. Gordianus returns in 2008 in *The Triumph of Caesar*.

None of the episodes in *Roma* are, strictly speaking, a murder mystery. But of course, amid all that research, it was inevitable that I would come across some criminal mayhem. One of the most intriguing tidbits involves what may be the first recorded mass murders in history. Here’s a loose translation of the tale as recounted by the Roman historian Livy (Book VIII, chapter 18), writing about Rome in the year 332 B.C.:

This year gained an evil notoriety, either because of pestilence or human guilt. Since the authorities are not unanimous on the point, I would gladly believe it was disease, not poison, that carried off so many victims. But lest I impugn the credibility of our sources, I shall relate the sordid details just as they’ve been handed down to us.

The foremost men in the state were being attacked by the same mysterious malady, which in almost every case proved fatal.

*“I come  
across such  
extraordinary  
material all the  
time in my  
research.”*

A maidservant went to the city magistrate, Quintus Fabius Maximus, and promised to reveal the cause of these suspicious deaths, provided the state would guarantee her safety. Fabius went at once to the consuls, who referred the matter to the senate, which authorized a promise of protection and immunity.

The maidservant then accused certain women of concocting poisons. If officers would follow her at once, she said, they could catch the poison makers in the act. The officers followed the informant and did indeed find the accused compounding poisonous substances, along with batches of poisons that were already made up.

The evidence was seized and brought into the Forum. Twenty high-born matrons, at whose houses poisons were discovered, were brought before the magistrates. Two of the women, Cornelia and Sergia, both from ancient patrician families, contended that the concoctions were medicinal preparations. Accused of lying, the maidservant suggested that the women should drink some of the supposed medicine themselves, if they wished to prove it was harmless.

The court was cleared of spectators. The accused women consulted among themselves. All consented to drink the potions, whereupon they all died.



Their attendants were arrested at once, and informed against a large number of matrons. Eventually, 170 women were found guilty.

Up to that time there had never been a public investigation of poisoning in Rome. The whole incident was regarded as a evil portent, and the women were thought to have acted out of madness rather than deliberate wickedness.

No wonder Livy couldn't resist relating this episode—he knew a good story when he heard one! Here we have multiple murders among the high born, betrayal by a servant, mass suicide, and an ever-expanding circle of accusation and guilt. There's even an attempt to explain the event as the result of mass hysteria. But in ancient Rome, there was no insanity defense.

I come across such extraordinary material all the time in my research; when there's murder involved, my interest is especially piqued. Naturally, I had to find a way to incorporate this incident in *Roma*, and so I set about uncovering all I could about the poisonings. (See Chapter VII, "The Architect of His Own Fortune.") In the end, the tale is only a tiny ingredient in what I hope will be a rich banquet of a book—but a little murder, like a powerful spice, goes a long way.

## *Historical Perspective*

## Recommended Reading

### *Ancient Authors*

**Livy (Titus Livius).** *The History of Rome from Its Foundation.* Penguin Classics. Four volumes:

I. *The Early History of Rome*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, 1960.

II. *Rome and Italy*, translated by Betty Radice, 1982.

III. *The War with Hannibal*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, 1965.

IV. *Rome and the Mediterranean*, translated by Henry Bettenson, 1965.

Living in the age of Augustus, Livy recounted the story of Rome with intense drama and majestic sweep.

**Plautus.** *The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, translated by E. F. Watling. Penguin Classics, 1965.

Take parts and read a comedy aloud! This collection includes “The Swaggering Soldier,” mentioned in *Roma*.

**Plutarch.** *Lives.* Various translations and editions.

The brief, individual biographies include those of Romulus, Coriolanus, Camillus, Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Julius Caesar, and Marc Antony. Plutarch was the chief inspiration for Shakespeare’s magnificent *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* (also highly recommended).



*Modern Historians*

**Cornell, T. J. *The Beginnings of Rome*.  
Routledge, 1995.**

The single most essential book for understanding early Rome.

**Wiseman, T. P. *Remus: A Roman Myth*.  
Cambridge University Press, 1995.**

From the tale of Romulus and Remus, a challenging historian wrests startling new ideas.

**Matyszak, Philip. *Chronicle of the Roman Republic*.  
Thames & Hudson, 2003.**

A copiously illustrated survey of Rome and its rulers from Romulus to Augustus.

*Keep on  
Reading*



## Reading Group Questions

- 1) What did you know about ancient Rome before reading this novel? Did this book teach you something new or change your impression of this important chapter in the world's history of civilization?
- 2) Which characters in the book are the most memorable, and why? Which characters were makers of history? Which characters were victims of history?
- 3) In what ways is the city of Rome itself a character in this novel?
- 4) Why *do* modern readers enjoy novels about the past? Which is more important, the ability of a historical novel to educate or to entertain? How does *Roma* compare with other historical novels you've read (as a group or on your own)?
- 5) What comparisons can be drawn between Roman politics, religion, and foreign policy and those of the United States?
- 6) How, if at all, do you think the rise and fall of Rome can be used as a cautionary tale—or history lesson—for today's world superpowers?



- 7) In *Roma*, certain ceremonies—like the celebration of the sacred geese and ritual punishment of a dog to mark an episode in the capture of the city by the Gauls—endure through the centuries, even when their original significance becomes hazy. Are there any rituals we practice today, even though we can't explain what they mean or how they began?
- 8) Two thousand years later, why is there still such a widespread fascination with Rome? What elements of that enduring fascination are captured or evoked by the novel?
- 9) We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a moral. Is there a “moral” to *Roma*? What can we learn about our world—and ourselves—from this book?
- 10) Who has ever been to Rome? Discuss your impressions of the imperial city and how its history is seen through the eyes of those who visit.