



Saturnalia

Lindsey Davis

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It is the Roman holiday of Saturnalia. Marcus Didius Falco and Helena have returned from Greece only to find that Helena's brother Justinus's marital problems have exploded. Justinus's first love, Veleda, a tribal leader and prophetess from Germania, has been brought to Rome and put under house arrest pending a ritual sacrifice at her capturer's Triumph.

Justinus is love-struck once more and his wife, the temperamental Claudia, is enraged. Then Veleda escapes leaving behind a corpse. Justinus disappears too and it is up to Falco and the Chief Spy Anacrites to try to find the missing couple all against the backdrop of the orgiastic holiday period when literally anything goes .

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Saturnalia Details

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Author : Lindsey Davis

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Trish says

One of my favourite Falco novels. I've listened to it several times, thanks to Christian Rodska's excellent narration. It is very funny in places - after all Saturnalia is the time for craziness- the plot is interesting and there's development of the recurring characters in addition. Falco's extended family are as colourful as ever.

itpdx says

Another fun Falco mystery. This is set in Rome and was particularly fun for me to read, as I am just back from Rome. It is fun to try to visualize the forum including the various temples mentioned in the book as it must have been in AD76. And to know how far it is across the forum and up Aventine Hill. I really enjoy how Lindsey Davis includes information on the Saturnalia celebrations, slavery, homelessness, the various practices of medicine, and other aspects 1st century Rome as part of the story without resorting to long, scholarly digressions. I enjoy her depictions of strong, smart women, such as Helena, her mother Julia and Veleda, the German priestess. And Davis's wonderful sense of humor.

John says

This series by Lindsey Davis is one of the benign guilty pleasures in my library. I have read all of her books that follow her protagonist Marcus Didius Falco as he solves crimes in ancient Rome. These fun romps are in an interesting setting with just a smattering of historical gloss to keep me grounded in the time period. Written in a style that is closest to the TV scribblers who created Dragnet the plot moves along rapidly with enough twists and turns to remain interesting. A line like, "the mysterious dark haired lady showed up on my doorstep asking for help with a pair of 38's pointed into my chest...she had a gun too." would not be entirely out of character in these works. In short, nothing profound, but quite entertaining, particularly if you have followed Davis repeating cast of characters since her first books.

Scot says

This is the 18th installment in the Marcus Didius Falco mystery series but the first I ever read. The narrator/detective hero is an investigator who often works for the Emperor or other important figures in imperial Rome. The time is 76 A.D., so the emperor is Vespasian, and their December holiday of Saturnalia is just beginning. The plot involves a German warrior priestess fleeing from house arrest immediately after a Roman nobleman's head is found, minus his body, floating ominously in the atrium pool in front of her former quarters. Falco must track her down and turn her in, and to complicate matters, she saved his life years ago and was the first love of his current brother-in-law, who stands accused of treason for aiding her.

I have to say it always helps when a detective-narrator has a great sense of humor, when his observations regularly convey droll wit, and Davis's Falco certainly scores well in that area. The large cast of characters was a bit cumbersome, but there are maps, family trees, and character summaries in the front matter so if you get confused or want to pause and re-focus as you read along, support is available.

I didn't find the process of unravelling who committed the murders particularly compelling in this novel, (yes, the murders accumulate as the book goes on), but for learning more about the society, culture, practices, and geographic layout of first century Rome in an entertaining and enjoyable way, this book was delightful. I am not myself a student of Latin or Classics, but if I was teaching in those areas, I might well consider supplementing coursework with student readings of books like this, because the author taught me quite a bit about the feast of Saturnalia, the first century views on medicine, and the prescribed gender, class, and family relation roles of that culture while I took pleasure in getting to know the main characters and their diverse and often humorous wide range of secondary support characters. It is clear to me just after one book what a charming and smart sidekick Falco's noble wife Helena is during his many investigations, and what a delicious arch-nemesis is provided by his investigative competition, Anacrites the Spy.

I never came across this series before, but it is good enough to consider starting from the beginning, so that one might see the characters' lives go forward as they grow together.

Linda Humberstone says

Very enjoyable read, good story written with wit and never boring. The main character, Falco, is believable with a dry sense of humour as he pursues his goal. Along the way you meet other members of his family along with their foibles and reactions that are recognisable within one's own family. The story never falters but proceeds along at just the right rate to keep your interest and curiosity active.

Julie Davis says

#16 - 2010.

This is where I left off with the series; picking it up again I discovered that I actually had read the book but had such vague memories that I couldn't remember who the murderer was. I, therefore, read with much enjoyment. As anyone reading this series knows, much of the pleasure is from the development of the regular characters in Marcus Didius Falco's immediate family and author Lindsey Davis's way of making ancient customs and ways accessible to the modern reader. Highly enjoyable.

Janet Martin says

My favorite of a long and excellent mystery series. This was a particularly touching account of a holiday period with a prosperous Roman family celebrating at the same time the desperate poor were trying to survive in the tombs outside of Rome. As always, Davis combines historical detail with human reality and brings the past to life--while placing all in a particularly fine mystery plot

Ed says

I love Informer (think private detective) Marcus Didius Falco. He is the Spenser (see Robert B. Parker) of ancient Rome. He even has a Hawk-like friend in Petronius, whom he served in the Legions with. I've read quite a few, 22 to be exact, of Davis' ongoing Falco series and with only one exception, "See Delphi and

Die", found them to be delightful reads.

In this episode, Falco is called to the Imperial Palace to be offered an assignment to find and recapture a German Priestess, Veleda, who has escaped from house arrest and with whom he has a history. There are, of course, many complications as in all Falco undertakings, not the least being that his brother-in-law, Justinus, had an affair with Veleda years earlier and he too has disappeared. Aside from palace politics and his own family issues, as well as a few murders, it is the Saturnalia Holiday, a five day drunken celebration and one in which very few people are working.

Somehow, in his usual wise-cracking, way and with the help of his lovely wife, Helena, and friend, Petronius, he is able to tie everything up by the last day of Saturnalia. There are a few surprises as Falco does his thing but all is tied up at the end with a satisfying conclusion to the entire story.

If you've never read any of the Falco Series, this would not be a bad place to start. At some point, though, it would be a good idea to find the first book in the series, "The Silver Pigs", and read it so you can see where he's come from and enjoy the many ironies in Falco's life.

Greg says

This is almost the 20th book in the Falco series, and it seems to be getting a little long in the tooth. All our old friends are back, and it is set in Rome, as the best of the Lindsey Davis books seem to be. A fun, light read, but I feel like I'm going through the usual motions when reading this one.

TTocs says

I love Lindsey Davis her Vespasian era detective stories. I love her characters and the historical period. This book seemed set to complain about the unhappiness that envelopes the Saturnalia holiday (the roman holiday dedicated to the overthrow of Roman norms and a return to the primitive state in midwinter celebrating the harvest past and the harvest to come). This would be the Roman equivalent of Christmas holidays. Davis brings in a huge portion of the extended family to illustrate the problems with these rampant festivities and the misery they hide or create. So much of the family is included in the story that they all get short shrift. Even Veleda the former priestess and prophethess of the germanic tribe the Bructerii gets very little scope in the story. This despite the fact that her appearance in Rome and subsequent disappearance after a murder takes place in her safe house are central to the plot.

All the characters get very little play in the story entering and leaving rapidly often with simply a summary description as in Junia the proper sister, or Allia the tired sister.

The plot also bogs down with an examination of homelessness, ostensibly in ancient Rome but certainly relatable to present day.

The story isn't very funny and Lindsey Davis normally is quite funny, and a lot of the characters don't ring true for me. Maia, Veleda, Claudia Rufina, Albia even Brother Justinus don't seem like themselves and they don't really get much to do.

The over ambitious book is uneven, unfunny and feels a little too much like an attempt at moralizing. At least she doesn't kill off building contractors or literary agents like she did in earlier books where she was riding a personal hobby horse of her own.

Generally I love her books. This one was long and unsatisfying.

The Library Lady says

How can you go wrong with a book that features a guy dressed up as a 5 foot high carrot at the Roman equivalent of a police precinct's Christmas party?

This is the 18th of the Falco books. But if you picked this one up and had never read any of the previous books, my guess is after reading it you'd want to go back and read the previous 17. And for those of us who have been Falcophiles for years, this is pure delight.

Christian Rodska does a good narration, but like most male narrators, he doesn't do so good a job with women's voices. I found his "Claudia Rufina" voice especially annoying--it sounded like the drag queen maid in "The Birdcage" I really wish this--and other books--could have 2 narrators, one male and one female!

Libri-Diligo says

Lindsey Davis finally lets MDF remain in Rome, and the outcome yields a much better read than the prior few installments. Unless you've read the complete series until now, some of the characters' actions and allusions to other scenes may be hard to follow. My main disappointment was in reading the author comments afterwards - I don't understand why some British authors feel the need to disparage the intelligence of their American audience.

Assaph Mehr says

Falco goes back to revisit a character from book 4 (the Iron Hand of Mars) and solve an historical puzzle

Expect a tale of murder, foreign prophetsess, annoying arch-nemesis, and general holiday mayhem as Davis offers her own ideas about what happened to Veleda.

Be aware that while it's not necessary to read the books in order, it certainly helps; Falco's family life has evolved throughout the series, and play a big part in describing daily lives and plot points.

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Assaph Mehr, author of Murder In Absentia: A story of Togas, Daggers, and Magic - for lovers of Ancient Rome, Murder Mysteries, and Urban Fantasy.

Linda says

As I continue through the Falco series I am entertained from start to finish. Helena Justina and Falco are home from their trip to Greece and they are celebrating the winter holiday of Saturnalia. Of course Falco has a case to solve which also becomes more than one mystery. The Germanic priestess who we met in a previous book (and made a huge impression on Helena's brother Justinus) has been brought to Rome. When

she finds out that she is due to be killed she runs away from her house arrest and Falco is called in.

steve day says

Ideal Xmas read

I usually read Terry Pratchett's Hogfather over Xmas, but think I will add this wonderful read in future. The Author is at her relaxed and humorous best in one of the last books in this excellent series.
