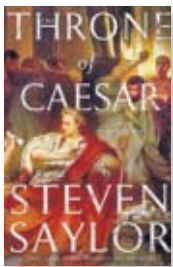


Reaching the end of the Appian Way

Debra Craine comes to bury and praise an ancient Roman sleuth



The Throne of Caesar

A Novel of Ancient Rome
by Steven Saylor

Constable, 387pp; £20.99

How do you say goodbye to a much-loved character? Fans of Steven Saylor's ancient Roman mysteries will be sad to learn that this is the end for Gordianus the Finder, the private detective hero of the "Roma sub Rosa" series. For more than 20 years, through 13 novels and two volumes of short stories, Saylor has woven Gordianus's exploits into a colourful tapestry of real historical events. Now, with *The Throne of Caesar*, the 14th novel in the series, the door is gently closing on one of crime fiction's most likeable creations.

Gordianus has lived through the most popular era in Roman history and interacted with such real-life giants as Cicero, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, while solving a marvellous variety of dastardly crimes and exposing some of society's dirtiest little secrets. In *The Throne of Caesar*, it's 44BC and Gordianus is plonked right in the middle of the plot to assassinate Caesar when he's asked to investigate rumours of a conspiracy.

Saylor, a scholarly American with a fine eye for authentic detail and a flair for plotting murder, realises there's no mys-

tery in that storyline — everyone knows who killed Rome's great dictator. Instead, the writer introduces another victim, who meets an untimely end at Caesar's funeral. So along with what feels like a true-to-life chronicle of that eventful day, Saylor embroiders his tale with much fascinating — and disturbing — conjecture.

This isn't our first farewell to Gordianus. More than a decade ago, in *The Judgment of Caesar*, it looked as if the wily sleuth had died in Egypt while mourning his beautiful wife, Bethesda, who had apparently drowned in the Nile, but — surprise, surprise — there were further adventures to come. This time Saylor has learnt his lesson. It's clear from the first page that this final instalment will be nostalgic and reflective, bringing Gordianus, now in his mid-sixties and a respected member of Roman society, full circle in a most engaging manner.

If you are new to Saylor, you are in for a treat, because the politics and personal lives of the late Roman republic make compulsively entertaining reading. But maybe you should start with the trio of prequels (*The Seven Wonders*, *Raiders of the Nile* and *Wrath of the Furies*) in which young Gordianus, still finding his way in the world, skirts danger on a picturesque tour of ancient hotspots. After that you can tuck into *Roman Blood*, a book that was inspired by one of Cicero's cases, and pick up the series in chronological order.



TOGA TROUBLE Marlon Brando as Mark Antony in the 1953 film of *Julius Caesar*

