

The Course of Honor

by Lindsey Davis

The Course of Honor has had a long history.

I had left my office job, sick of always being given the hard tasks and never being given rewards. A romantic novel I had written to cheer myself up was runner-up in a competition, so I decided to risk all and try to be a writer.

I wanted to write historical novels, probably romantic fiction for women. My chosen period was the English Civil War, which I tackled in the only style I have ever used: with humour, domestic interests, and also politics. Humour worried publishers and so did politics — even when the setting was a great revolutionary conflict! I had serials published in a women's magazine (they are tougher than people think and could cope) But I just could not find anyone to publish my work in book form.

Needing to pay my bills, I decided to change the setting. It was madness to choose the Romans, of course, but I always liked a challenge. I had been introduced to archaeology at school, particularly Roman Britain, which I now took as my starting point. Researching the Roman Invasion under the Emperor Claudius, I stumbled upon Vespasian. I convinced myself that people would have heard of the Colosseum in Rome, which he built, and that if they had read 'I, Claudius' or seen the superb BBC TV serialisation with Derek Jakobi, they would find this era accessible.

In the Suetonius biography of Vespasian was a tantalising reference: 'after his wife died, he took up again with Caenis, his former mistress and one of Antonia's freedwomen and secretaries, who remained his wife in all but name, even after he became Emperor'. At the heart of this is the fact that a Roman senator was legally forbidden to marry a slave. The way Suetonius nervously refers to the affair — wanting to disapprove yet not quite managing it — attracted me.

When I worked out dates, using the known birthdays of Vespasian's two sons, I realised that here you had two people who were lovers when young, who separated for a period of many years during his marriage, and who went back together in middle age. That would be very unusual even today — it spoke resoundingly of True Love. An additional twist was that when Vespasian so unexpectedly became Emperor at the age of 60, everyone (including Caenis) must have believed that he would abandon her a second time?

I put many personal experiences into the novel, not least what I had learned at work — because this is, after all, the archetypal Secretary-to-Boardroom story. My Mom thought it was my best work; that counts! No publisher saw her point for the next ten years, during which time I developed the Falco detective novels and perhaps helped make the Roman period look more friendly. When at last 'The Course of Honour' was published,

internationally, it was a special thrill for me. I see it as my first real book, and because the true story is so wonderful, it will always be my favourite.

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