

## Falco the Ambulance Chaser?

*by Lindsey Davis*

I have been joking that after fifteen years of writing about Falco, I finally found a book that told me what Roman informers do.

Of course we already know what he says he does. 'I'm a private informer,' he tells Sosia in 'The Silver Pigs'. 'I operate for sad, middle-aged men who think their wives are sleeping with charioteers and even sadder ones who know their wives are sleeping with their nephews...'. By the time I came to write 'Shadows in Bronze' I felt I should elaborate the wisecracks. In a dire situation and a grim mood, Falco mutters: 'In my time I had operated for perjurers, petty bankrupts and frauds. I swore court affidavits to denounce highborn senators for debauchery so great that even under Nero it could not be covered up. I found missing children for parents who would better abandon them, and pleaded lost causes for widows without legacies who married their spineless lovers the very next week - just when I had got them some money of their own. Most of the men tried to dodge off without paying, while most of the women wanted to pay me in kind. You can guess which kind. Never a sweet capon or a fine fish.'

Clearly I had done some serious research even then. But last year I came across a new book that evaluated the origins and work of the known informers in the imperial period. It was a cross between those American lawyers we call ambulance chasers and the high-powered, very high-earning libel lawyers who operate here for celebrities and macho businessmen. In Rome there were several kinds, including those who rose from impoverished backgrounds, just like Falco, often working under cover for an emperor, just as he does. Another, very visible type was one I had not yet explored: men whose rank was much higher. They were loathed for abuses under Nero, when informers in the upper echelons of society frequently helped him to condemn men whose wealth he could plunder. Senators in that period who acted as accusers in court targeted their social equals, accused them of serious crimes (probably falsely), then either helped the emperor acquire to their estates and took a percentage or themselves acquired the money directly. They were blamed for both their greed and their cruelty. The victims were often innocent, but the whole Senate was forced to co-operate and to implicate itself in the guilty verdicts, acting out of fear.

That was an interesting scenario. I envisaged a story where Falco, our ranter against social injustice, would rage against such practices - while himself caught in the ambiguity of sharing the trade of the men he despises. Legal work was what had given the informer (called a delator or an accuator in Latin) such a bad press with contemporaries. For Romans in the First Century, use of informers was the trademark of an evil emperor, from Tiberius through Caligula and Nero - and eventually it would be one of the bad practices that damned Domitian. Domitian is Falco's long-term enemy, which gives this extra piquancy.

As I plotted this story I decided it would feature real-life high-rank prosecutors. Falco would reluctantly move into their world, at which both he and I had hinted frequently. That quote from 'Shadows in Bronze' has him claiming to belong in it already. It was time to see what he could do in a legal thriller - and perhaps even time for him to show off his advocacy in court.

I was not sure that I could write legal speeches. You will have to give your verdict on that!

My first need was for a legal plot, which needed a particularly Roman flavour. I found that in a wry situation where it becomes the task of a 'good' Roman lawyer to advise a client that for reasons of family honour (and to protect his money) his best course is suicide. You will see how it works. This situation enabled me to show how differently we view some elements of Roman society now, something I have always regarded as one of the main features of writing historical novels. It is also an ideal starting point for a crime novel, as you have the immediate question, was it really suicide?

Luck plays a great part in planning a book. As I first investigated the known informers in my period, I simply looked for a couple I could use. Perhaps I even specifically wanted men about whom very little was known, so I could invest them with characteristics nobody could challenge. This is feeble, I admit, but I have never quite recovered from using the name of Rutilius Gallicus then finding out too late that 'More is known about Rutilius Gallicus than any Roman of the period outside the imperial court.' (In fact, watch out for the return of poet, soldier and statesman Rutilius soon, in a key role... ) This time luck was with me. I settled on Paccius Africanus and Silius Italicus as my chosen men. Both, as it happens, had an intriguing and sordid past. Even better, both were rewarded for their tainted histories with the state's highest honours - and their rewards came the very year after my book is set! I found myself reacting to that just as cynically as Falco would. I won't spoil the story by telling you the 'sleaze', but the information leads to what may be his finest hour so far.

It gets him into trouble. Still, readers will be expecting that.

I did not consciously set out to make good his old boasts about his profession - yet I can tell you, there is perjury, bankruptcy and fraud. There is even a widow with a legacy problem. There are wives who may be sleeping with the wrong people and husbands ditto, naturally. But to start at the beginning: Falco agrees to swear out a court affidavit, in a case involving a senator.

Now, as the old saying goes, read on...

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