

Lindsey Davis Acceptance Speech on receipt of the Premio Colosseo

First, I apologise for not speaking in Italian. The British are still barbarians, I'm afraid, even though the Roman historian Tacitus described attempts to civilise us and said, *'Instead of loathing the Latin language they became eager to speak it.'* Many of us still know more of Latin than modern languages, and indeed the current Mayor of London, where I live, often gives speeches in Latin. It causes consternation. But it shows the respect we have for your heritage, a respect that deeply colours my work.

For twenty years it has been my privilege to write about Rome. To me, neither your city nor the civilisation it produced really needs any enhancement, but I am delighted to have played my part in bringing Rome to the notice of readers around the world. Only this week I received an email which summed up what I try to do; a young woman wrote: *I am determined to visit Rome one day, partly as a result of your stories. I have found I have learned a lot about ancient Rome without realising it, far more than I would ever take in from a dry textbook.*

Our most famous English detective novelist, Agatha Christie, was married to an archaeologist and several of her mysteries are set in ancient sites. The older I get, the more affinity I feel with her elderly heroine Miss Marple, but when she conceived her other detective, Hercule Poirot, I believe that Dame Agatha made a ridiculous mistake. Who – what author in her right mind – would choose an eccentric and pompous Belgian, when she could instead have written about a virile Italian???

If there is one reason I am here today it is the character of my detective, Falco: Marco Didio, who pretends to be immune to Rome's charm but is at heart so devoted to his city and its best qualities. Often his stated attitude is that made famous in the cult film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*: '*Apart from sanitation, aqueducts, medicine, roads, education, wine, public order and peace, what have the Romans ever done for us?*' This is funny, but it also demonstrates our real awe of the Roman achievement. To be satirical, to criticise what is wrong with society, you have to begin with belief in a noble ideal.

As well as humour, I hope to woo my audience through giving an authentic picture of Roman life. I began very shyly, because the ancient world is not my own academic discipline, but gradually I felt able to ask assistance from experts, experts like Professor Bernard Frischer who is here tonight, the great exponent of presenting Rome through virtual reconstructions. And I would like to pay special tribute to the British School in Rome, one of our great institutions, dedicated to Italian culture and forming bonds between our countries. I never studied there formally yet have been given all kinds of friendly support over the years. When I was writing about the Roman water supply, an archaeologist at the British School decided I *must* be taken down the sewers – so I have seen Rome in a way most tourists don't – from underground, standing in storm water. Dressed in a plastic raincoat, waterproof boots and yellow washing-up gloves, all to protect us from viral infections, we went down a manhole in the Forum of Nerva. I am not good with heights, which means depths too, and indeed the descent has since been decreed too dangerous to be allowed. At one point I clung to the ladder, too frightened to move. From below I heard the British School archaeologist, Dr Will Bowden, calling:

'Remember, Lindsey, you are upholding the honour of British womanhood!' Meanwhile from above my own beloved partner Richard shouted a little more practically: *'Whatever you do, darling, don't let go!'* Was my terror worth enduring? Yes, because I learned a fact I would never have got from a textbook, which I ruefully shared with Falco: *When you have been down a sewer, no one will help you to pull off your boots.*

The one regret I have tonight is that Richard, who died two years ago, can't be here. From the moment we first came, when I had just begun writing, Rome was 'our' city. We spent very many happy hours in your wonderful museums and archaeological sites, basking in your climate, enjoying your cuisine. We also loved just to wander, with no particular aim and hardly looking at the map, just observing places and people and absorbing the atmosphere. We came every year. My love for your city is intricately bound up with the love we had for each other. It has always affected the way I present Rome in my books. Rome is a city of love and I think you will appreciate that.

To write about a great city and then to be recognised by that city for what you have done must be the highest achievement for an author. I am overwhelmed that you have chosen to give me the Premio Colosseo. This is an extraordinary honour, which I accept with much emotion, and I thank you very much indeed.

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