FALCO

THE OFFICIAL COMPANION

LINDSEY DAVIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

FALCO
THE OFFICIAL COMPANION

Historical novelist Lindsey Davis is best known for her novels set in Ancient Rome, including the much-loved Marcus Didius Falco series, although she has also written about the English Civil War, including in 2014, *A Cruel Fate*, a book for the Quick Reads literacy initiative. Her examination of the paranoid reign of the roman emperor Domitian began with *Master and God*, a standalone novel, leading to her new series about Flavia Albia, set in that dark period.

Her books are translated and have been dramatised on BBC Radio 4. Her many awards include the Premio Colosseo (from the city of Rome) and the Crime Writers' Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement. Most recently she was awarded the City of Ubeda Historical Novel Prize, also for lifetime achievement.

ALSO BY LINDSEY DAVIS

The Course of Honour
Rebels and Traitors
Master and God

The Falco Series
The Silver Pigs
Shadows in Bronze
Venus in Copper
The Iron Hand of Mars
Poseidon's Gold
Last Act in Palmyra
Time to Depart
A Dying Light in Corduba
Three Hands in the Fountain
Two for the Lions
One Virgin Too Many
Ode to a Banker
A Body in the Bath House
The Jupiter Myth
The Accusers
Scandal Takes a Holiday
See Delphi and Die
Saturnalia
Alexandria
Nemesis

The Albia Series
The Ides of April
Enemies at Home
Deadly Election
The Graveyard of the Hesperides
The Third Nero
Pandora's Boy
A Capitol Death
The Grove of the Caesars
A Comedy of Terrors
Desperate Undertaking
Fatal Legacy
Death on the Tiber

FALCO

THE OFFICIAL COMPANION

LINDSEY DAVIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

First published by Century 2010
Published in Penguin Books 2025
001

Design and layout by Roger Walker

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–787–46978–5

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

This was in the Olden Days, when the Romans were top nation, on account of their classical education, etc.

Sellar and Yeatman

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure …

Chandler

Key to Abbreviations

The Course of Honour	[CH]

The Falco Novels in chronological order:

The Silver Pigs	[SP]
Shadows in Bronze	[SB]
Venus in Copper	[VC]
The Iron Hand of Mars	[IHM]
Poseidon's Gold	[PG]
Last Act in Palmyra	[LAP]
Time to Depart	[TTD]
A Dying Light in Corduba	[DLC]
Three Hands in the Fountain	[THF]
Two for the Lions	[TFL]
One Virgin Too Many	[OVTM]
Ode to a Banker	[OB]
A Body in the Bath House	[BBH]
The Jupiter Myth	[JM]
The Accusers	[AC]
Scandal Takes a Holiday	[STH]
See Delphi and Die	[SDD]
Saturnalia	[SA]
Alexandria	[AL]
Nemesis	[NM]

Contents

Introduction

As the girl came running up the steps, I decided she was wearing far too many clothes … [SP]

With these words I launched the career of Marcus Didius Falco, the Roman informer, in 1989. Twenty years and twenty books later, he has discerning and devoted followers worldwide and I have had a wonderful career. It seems time to offer the *Companion* volume so many readers have asked for.

It won't be a textbook, definitely not a full handbook of Roman life.[1][2] There are hundreds of excellent books on the Roman world, written and illustrated by experts, something I have never claimed to be. The Internet is crowded with information, some of it even reliable. I will mention some of my sources, but remember, that's what they are – the particular books, sites and museums that I used for the series. For serious study you should seek out your own. I shall merely touch on aspects of Roman life that have caused puzzlement. My opinions may be grumpy and maverick. On the other hand, I hold those opinions because, after twenty years of loving and living with this subject, I think I am right.

I won't create a comprehensive encyclopaedia of every character, place, murder weapon, stuffed vineleaf and cockroach in the books. How ghastly that would be! My intention is to shed light on how the books are written, why I tackle particular subjects and what I believe to be important in portraying my characters. I will talk a little about my own background, because that is what made me think, imagine, believe, love and hate the way I do. My early life partly explains where the books came from. This is probably as much as I will ever write autobiographically, containing family anecdotes even my family have forgotten, because families and the mad myths that colour their generations are central to the Falco series.

I wanted to give you glossy illustrations, pull-out maps and give-away models. Sadly, we are constrained

[1] There will be no footnotes
[2] Except this one

to simple and black-and-white illustrations; this is 'due to the Recession' (*That old story!* Falco would scoff). Rodney Paul, who has always created our maps, has produced some brilliant technical drawings of Roman inventions; Bernard Frischer has very kindly allowed us to use stills from 'Rome Reborn'. Many photographs are from my own collection, so while they may not be of the best professional standard, they are the specific photos Richard and I took on our trips, my personal reminders of useful things we saw. They go back over twenty years and often I can't tell now who took which, when it was – or even where. We never catalogued anything; we just piled them into drawers. You may disapprove, but this is one authentic source of the books' relaxed style. For us, life was too short to keep minute records and until very recently I had no thought that we might one day need to impress the stern public.

Linda Hodgson and Roger Walker at Random House who designed this book have done wonders with the often unpromising material I offered them. And poor Katie Duce in Century editorial, who found herself unexpectedly landed with organising me on two books at once, has been kind, calm, and unfailingly efficient throughout. Beth Humphries has done a wonderful job of copy editing, as she always does. Vicki Robinson produced a professional, helpful index; she is not responsible for the joke entries someone slipped in afterwards.

People have been extremely generous with permissions; they are listed and thanked in the Acknowledgements. Mary Fox at Penguin went to particular trouble to unravel aged copyrights.

I want to give a special mention to the close team who encouraged and helped me slowly produce this book: my agent, Heather Jeeves, who lightly whipped me to finish, and my editor, Oliver Johnson, who championed the idea and scrutinised the manuscript as meticulously as ever. Janet Jenvey supervised my homework chart. And my great thanks to Ginny Lindzey and Michelle Breuer Vitt, for their contributions and unfailing interest.

This has been a hard, sad year for me personally. I lost Richard, and then Oliver resigned. To carry on with Falco, while surveying my past career, was a

surreal experience. But it helped me remember why you, my loyal readers all around the world, enjoy and love the books so much. Even in times of trouble, that gives a validation to my life. I am very proud to have provided so much pleasure, intrigue and consolation. I cherish the friendships I have made, often with people I have never met or may never hear from. But I know you are there. This book, this little extra bit of fun, is all for you.

Lindsey Davis
London, 2010

Background, Writing and Research

The Author's Birth and Background

Anyone planning to be a writer needs to start *before they are born*.

People ask for advice. It's simple: be the child of a famous published author; use their surname. You will be published immediately. Join writers' cliques; your books will always be reviewed.

You must: be blond, stay young, be photogenic. Or, write in your eighties, a different ploy, which carries risks and leads to a short career. Even then, you must be a well-spoken charmer with snowy white hair and elegant attire.

Never reveal that you write in a paint-stained velour leisure suit, with orthopaedic inserts in your thermal slippers.

Once born: organise your book jacket biography. Work on a tramp streamer in the South Seas. Serve a prison term; treasure that transsexual's bigamy claims against you (boast or deny this, according to taste); catalogue your experiences with your pet lion cub (make it die in poignant circumstances). You must have an abusive father, a cheating husband, delinquent children and whimsical cats to write about. What else is there?

I knew none of this. I had no authors in my pedigree, though my father had done academic editing for Robert Maxwell's press. Connections in publishing have helped many new authors. But Mum made Dad give up his Maxwell work because she did not trust the man. In this, as in so many things, Joanie's perceptiveness glowed bright.

I was born in Birmingham. Many authors have come from there, though most keep quiet about it.

Brum has no Roman heritage. We pretend there is a 'fort' beside the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, but it's just a signal station. I grew up in an inventive manufacturing city with a strong Nonconformist background, still

famous then for cars, guns, jewellery, chocolate, HP sauce. All gone, sadly. The dictionary definition of Brummagem is *counterfeit, sham, cheap and showy*, so like all Brummies, I droop under a permanent sense of shame.

… your relatives, given you by nature with no effort on your part …
HORACE
(telling us something?)

My background was working-class. One grandfather was a foreman electrician – at the Gas Works – and the other a toolmaker. My cousin Jennie researches my mother's family; the Barkers were butchers and hairdressers. Auntie Eleanor had a wool shop, Flo and Glad a general store. Lovely Uncle Wally Stephens founded the Thor Hammer Company. Great-Grandfather Barker, who lived in the Black Country, had kept a pub; he drank a bottle of whisky a day and would brandish a shotgun at closing time. He was thought eccentric. For instance, he believed handkerchiefs were dangerous; people should blow their noses on a piece of old rag, then throw it in the fire.

And he was an atheist, a follower of Charles Bradlaugh, the Northampton MP who secured the right of affirmation (instead of taking a religious oath) for Members of Parliament and witnesses in court. Bradlaugh's Secular Society argued that freedom *from* religion was as much a human right as freedom *of* religion. One aim was to allow children to be withdrawn from religious assembly at school, though there were penalties for it: *Stand up, the little boy whose father does not believe in God!* Grandad Barker was so traumatised that our family never did this again – until me. My own secondary school had a strong religious foundation, but I was allowed to withdraw from the service at assembly so long as I promised not to do homework instead; I said, *I'll knit, then!* (Not meant as offensive, but a practical solution.) My Aran and Fair Isle became exemplary.

On Dad's side, his father was a toolmaker and his mother's father a lamp-lighter. My great-great-grandad was a clockmaker, Martin Benzing, from Germany. A Socialist who had wanted to assassinate Bismarck, allegedly he lay in wait in a park where the Iron Chancellor went riding. Bismarck trotted past, slapping his riding crop, which broke; he hurled it into the bush where Martin was lurking. He grabbed it and fled. True: I have the yellowed ivory handle.

Supposedly, a Benzing became the Benson of '& Hedges' but of course I am not a tobacco heiress or I could be a Celebrity Author and wear diamanté jumpsuits. Wealth stuck to my people only fitfully. Grandfather Davis went to Canada; a trustful man, he made a fortune in apple orchards, but his partner stole the money (twice). My father in turn left everything – nearly half a million pounds – to a woman he met through the small ads who, like a villainess in Falco, claimed *she wasn't good with money*. The worst part of this was my estrangement from Dad. Incidentally, it was long after I invented Geminus.

As you see, my people lacked privilege. They all had trades or shops, though, rather than labouring or being servants. My family were not the intellectual class, effete, snooty and unable to wire an electric plug. We had no goofy twerps in plus-fours at big country-house parties, no female pioneers in Edwardian skirts sipping cocoa at early women's colleges. Ours was an urban Victorian heritage: the Barkers doing moonlit flits when they could not pay the rent; Mum (young and appealing) being dispatched to beg pub landlords to send Grandad home so he didn't spend all his wages; Grandma Davis hiring a barrel organ to raise money for the Jarrow miners. On both sides of my family was at least one man whose wife died in childbirth, after which – whatever gender historians maintain – the widower brought up the children.

My old man said 'Follow the van!' and don't dilly-dally on the way …
MUSIC HALL SONG

The Barkers were one such family. It was said that Grandad could get his wife pregnant just by hanging up his trousers on the end of the bed. Seven children survived, though we know there were others. A terrible tale is told that when my grandmother was in labour the last time, the doctor came downstairs and said, *I can't save your wife, but I can possibly save the baby* – to which Grandad said no. Thereafter he brought up the rest with an iron hand, famously cooking with a dangling cigarette; the ash provided flavour. Stories of this hungry, noisy, teeming tribe, and the songs Grandad sang, permeated my childhood. Cousin Dorrell remembers life at their house, with her as a child scampering from room to room, not knowing where to settle because there was always something exciting

The Barkers at leisure

going on somewhere else. Their catchphrase to visitors was *Come in, sit down, what'll you have to eat and drink?*

Another myth about the working classes is that: *the Victorian working man received his wages and his wife might never see a penny*. Grandad Davis knew his wife was the money-manager; he used to hand Lil his wage packet unopened. He died before I was born, but Grandma was a huge influence. She had friends everywhere; hers was another house where people constantly dropped in. A motto she gave me was: *Never stand when you can sit; never sit when you can lie down*. She was a tireless raconteur, a fund of stories. Dancing the tango with 'Mr Paul' Cadbury so everybody stopped to watch … Helping a nun run away from her convent … Grandad being chased by a policeman, for speeding (on his *bike)* all down the Pershore Road … I'm sure there was one about Grandad having once seen a crowd set upon a police constable and kill him. And let's dispel another cosy myth: even after the Second World War the name of Winston Churchill was never mentioned, because of Gallipoli, where Gran had had three brothers killed, including Charlie, her favourite.

Grandad and Grandma at the allotment

My parents were a curious pair, made for one another and yet doomed by association. Neither went to Grammar School, though both could have; Mum's family could not afford it and Dad wanted to be out enjoying the world. So, they both worked at Boxfoldia

and their first tryst was on a works outing, behind the summerhouse at Newnham College, Cambridge. They married during the war, in August 1942: 24–8–42 – not only a palindrome, but the probable anniversary of Vesuvius erupting in AD79.

I wish I had been at that wedding. Grandad Barker was so opposed, it was kept secret from him, but he found out and jumped on a bus to chase after the couple. When the registrar began, instead of 'Do you, Joan Margaret ...?' he used the wrong name. Even when he got it right, Mum paused for an endlessly long time before answering …

Nonetheless it happened, as mistakes inexorably do. They lived in Bury at first, as Dad was posted up north; a mouse used to come out and warm itself in front of the fire and Lancashire hotpot became a staple of my childhood. Mum's brothers had told Dad not to expect any dinner because Mum would always have her nose in a book; she just bought herself a cookbook. Dad was sent to India, running wireless communications on the Khyber Pass. Travel abroad was life-changing, which may resonate in Falco. Mum worked at an industrial company where her work was so secret she *never* disclosed it. She had a traumatic ectopic pregnancy; no doctor believed her complaints of pain until she collapsed in the street. She nearly died. It happened on her birthday, which from then on she refused to celebrate.

Joan and Bill wonder what they have done …

They were then obliged to wait, but four years after the war ended, my parents produced me. It was a difficult birth; I was three days in an incubator, when Mum never saw me and was afraid I had died.

My earliest memory is when I was just a toddler. We lived briefly in a flat in Snow Hill, the very centre of Birmingham, where every time Mum ran out my nappies on the pulley washing line, they came in black with smuts. She used to take me for air and escape to St Philip's Cathedral churchyard, where I was equally frightened by tramps and pigeons. Dad, to his credit, gained a degree by correspondence course, some feat with me, a very mardy baby; he became a lecturer at what was then

the College of Commerce, teaching public administration and politics. I next remember sitting on the path at our first little house in Ward End, surrounded by wallflowers and butterflies.

When I was three and a half, my brother Maxwell was born. He and I were always good friends though very different; I think he started taking clocks apart to see how they worked before he could talk. (For a long time he didn't bother to talk, because I did it for him.) Max had his first toolkit when most children were still on soft toys. He struggled at school; Mum had to help with his reading and I taught him his tables. I had a little blackboard because I wanted to be a teacher; in fact, I didn't have an 'imaginary friend', I had a complete imaginary class, with names, IQs and characteristics, whose careers I followed in real time for years.

To be a child in the 1950s was a mixture of opportunity and austerity. Birmingham had lost much of its housing stock, but now we lived in a new three-bed semi-detached, with metal windows, small gardens front and back, kitchen, bathroom, inside lavatory – even *French windows.* There was no central heating; in winter we had chilblains, we got dressed under the bedclothes, Jack Frost whitened the window glass, washing came in from the line solid with ice. Behind our row of houses lay 'the little field' – remains of a bomb site, a haven to play in. We were tough and sensible. Fathers just went and checked any new fly-tipping. Besides, it was nowhere near as dangerous as the flooded clay pit in the brickyard or the railway lines … Our play was grounded in imagination; toys were scarce, only given at Christmas and birthdays, though aunts and grandmas, or even close family friends, would slip a child some coppers, maybe even half a crown (you hid that, or it was 'saved' for you). I don't remember sweet-rationing, though I do remember it ending. Birmingham children had the benefit of Cadbury misshapes, which came in plain brown bags and were always the wrong ones – Turkish delight and toffee, never strawberry creams.

My class at primary school had forty-four children. Everywhere was painted green. Sometimes they still tested the air-raid sirens. We cut pencils in half to save money. For art we had a print of *The Laughing Cavalier* in the hall. Music was covered more ambitiously; members of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra would visit, and enormous radios would be brought into class for *Time and Tune* and *Music and Movement* (we'd be in anguish that the radio wouldn't warm up in time for our favourite song). Although we preferred belting out 'A Song of the Western Men', we also learned to read a score, and studied ambitious pieces – Smetana's *Vltava*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. We learned things by heart; we did mental arithmetic and spelling tests. For general knowledge we had booklets stuffed with tables of weights and measures, or Kings and Queens of England. We'd collect the *I Spy* or *Observer* series; even as a townee, I knew my ragged robin from my cow parsley. Rosebay willowherb was easy, because of the bomb sites.

As her leg was made of wood
And she did not want it known
At the point on which she stood,
She had fixed a rubber cone …

I was encouraged to read. Mum still liked her nose in a book, mainly from the library, though we did own books (more Left Book Club than classics). I was a rapid reader. I hated the Birmingham library policy that children were allowed only one fiction ticket to two non-fiction; you could cheat if your parents lent theirs, which must have been how I once read three Biggles books in a day. Mostly I liked books with strong young heroines, orphans who fought off adversity, like the *Anne of Green Gables* Mum passed on, Hodgson Burnett's *Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*. Other orphans were Edith Nesbit's well-meaning Bastables, which I preferred to *The Railway Children* even though, like *Little Women*, it had a female writer, with the insidious suggestion that you could earn money that way …

Is Falco Biggles? – Discuss.

We had books …

I came to some books through the radio: Noel Streatfeild, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, *Lorna Doone* (*Lorna Doone* still means Butterworth's *Banks of Green Willow*), *The Hobbit* ('Kaschei's Dance') – and eventually Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle of the Ninth: Some time about the year AD117 the Ninth*

Legion, which was stationed at Eboracum where York now stands, marched north to deal with a rising among the Caledonian tribes, and was never heard of again … Marcus set the bundle carefully on the table. 'We have brought back the Hispania's lost Eagle,' he said, rather muzzily, and very quietly crumpled forward on top of it. Ever since *The Flight of the Heron,* I have known I do not belong to my parents but am Bonnie Prince Charlie (except when being Hornblower).

I cannot over-stress the importance of radio. My family rarely went to the cinema, and due to a mix of meanness and liberal principles, we did not acquire a TV until I was fourteen. I grew up with classical music in the evenings, the Light Programme at Grandma's, music-hall numbers, Kathleen Ferrier – and radio drama, which is intricately bound up with written fiction for me. *Saturday Night Theatre* would introduce me to classic detective stories. Perhaps that's why the Falco novels are told in the first person, as if he is talking to us in a radio play.

… we had radio.

Another great feature of radio, then later TV, was comedy. My tastes are unfashionable; I preferred Michael Bentine of the Goons and never took to Monty Python, loathing the deep misogyny of male comics dressing up as hideous caricature women. I did my weekend homework with *The Navy Lark* and *Round the Horne,* before *Pick of the Pops;* and I loved the Pythons' radio predecessor, *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*. The point about these is that they had zany, quick-fire sketches, irreverence, non sequiturs, songs, in-jokes and catchphrases. Radio can do it, with a lightness of touch TV lacks; books do it. The facility to draw on all aspects of cultural life, firing a glancing shot then passing on rapidly, is special to the radio generation. Think of Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams. Certainly think of Falco.

A vast behind! … I think I am a slice of rhubarb tart …

My folks were upwardly mobile. The College of Commerce became Birmingham Polytechnic. We moved to a middle-class suburb, a 1930s house with dry rot and treacly brown paint that had to be stripped off; we acquired central heating, a coke boiler that often

Author aged ten

jammed and blew off steam, bringing ceilings down and making the dog shit in terror all over the breakfast room (my brother had a dog; our new house had a 'breakfast room'). What we didn't have were friends. My father always had his colleagues at work but Mother was losing her contacts; my brother was put in a prissy primary school where the headmaster was over-keen on little girls and Max overheard a teacher sneer, *He's not as clever as his sister.* The rot had set in.

I had passed the exams to King Edward's, the Girls' High School. There I was given a superb education, made friends I still have today, was taught by wonderful women – and was provided with a base of my own outside the family. It was understood that to be female was irrelevant. If you were given the tools, you could master any discipline; if you had the talent, you could become anything you chose. I would be, indeed I still am, shocked to discover that the world does not always accept those principles. Clearly they underpin everything I have done as a writer.

My school was the making of me intellectually, and when things fell apart at home, it was the saving of me too.

Things had begun to change when we moved. My mother discovered that my father – gregarious, popular, spoiled and self-centred – had a long history of philandering (he always pooh-poohed this, but I heard his confessions to Mum). My mother – once gregarious and popular herself – became isolated and secretive. Divorce was rare, and carried a stigma. Instead, once Max and I were in bed, my parents quarrelled – shouting, slamming doors. I lay awake in dread, night after night, through most of my teen years. Eventually my mother had a nervous breakdown. Psychiatric treatment entailed barbiturates and a stay in hospital where she had electro-convulsive treatment. Now I know what that entails, I can hardly bear to think of it being imposed on a human being. If 'electric shock treatment' was given to prisoners of war, it would be denounced as torture. Psychiatrists say it works. I suggest it 'works' because patients who can do so simply close down and look obedient to make the experience stop.

Mum came home. Her true personality was lost. We carried on. That was what you did. Families kept secrets. Even my brother and I never spoke about it; I never knew if he heard or understood what happened.

I passed my exams – though with very mixed results, a rarity at King Edward's which, then as now, excelled at training girls to pass. My results could be due to undiagnosed hay fever in the exam season, laziness about subjects where I needed to work, or my unhappy home life and lack of sleep. I mention it because these days when only rows of A*s count, people like me must suffer. Instead, I stayed for an extra term to do the Oxbridge entrance exams and Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford accepted me. So I went to the best university and now carry out a profession where I use scholarship and serious creativity. Think on, foolish grade snobs!

I had elected to read English because I was better at it, rather than History, which would have been my first choice. This proved right. My course was 'English Language and Literature'; I revelled in both parts equally. However much attention is paid to the history, Eng Lang and Lit are the true underpinnings of my work. I write novels first, historical novels second. Despite experimental moments, they are in the tradition of English fiction. Their important constituents are plot, character, dialogue and narrative approach. My tools are grammar and vocabulary. Selection of detail is a vital element, and that may be historical, but without the rest, everything would be banal. Plenty of banal novels are published, but you read mine because you have better taste.

In my second year at Oxford, a terrible event occurred. My brother Maxwell had always struggled at school; his genius was technical, not academic. We were both painfully shy in company, gauche with the opposite sex, crushed by failures. I at least always had a very sharp sensitivity whereas he was other-worldly. When he hit puberty he became depressed, ran away 'to think', complained of suicidal feelings.

Strings were pulled to get him into the psychiatric unit where my mother had been treated. He had the same regime of drugs and ECT. Staff thought he was

recovering and allowed him to go by himself to a day room, to play his guitar. The unit was on the fifth floor. It had safety locks on the windows, but Max simply unscrewed one. He went out and died of his injuries. He was seventeen.

My mother was prostrate. I accompanied my father to the inquest. The coroner concluded, *He just had a hard time growing up.* The verdict was simply that he killed himself. My parents were told that the unit would be moved. It wasn't. Some years later when other patients committed suicide there, I wrote to the psychiatrist, who used the tired justification *When people really want to kill themselves, they will.* It seems to me that with young people at least, whose problems are put down to adolescence, strenuous efforts to keep them safe might help them outgrow their difficulties and survive.

When I returned to college, I sat alone on my bed and thought, *Nothing will ever be as bad as this again.*

Sometimes I write about those whose lives are changed for ever by the actions of other people, and I do so with feeling. I probably had no inkling immediately that as a result I would never marry or have children, both of which I wanted. Men fled. I don't blame them; my family looked mad and I became a strange person for many years. Any who were strong enough to cope were too strong and would have swamped me. I won't ever write a misery memoir; I pity the people who do and those who are connected with them. But in a discussion of my work, this is a defining issue.

I don't say I write because I have alone; that is clearly untrue. But it helps. I always enjoyed writing and would

probably one day have tried it, but I doubt if I would have left the civil service if I had had responsibilities. The poverty and uncertainty I then lived in for nearly five years could not have been imposed on others. Getting first published is so hard, I needed to work at it full time. It took four years to my first book – and as I was always refusing to follow trends, that was actually quite good going.

Most definitely, I have written the Falco series at one book a year, which is a very tough schedule. They are dense books, longer than some novels; such production was possible only because I had long quiet periods for writing. Richard and I had the closest companionship for over thirty years but I remained single; I did most of my creative work at times when I was alone in a quiet house.

I reject 'writing as therapy'; you need to filter and mould. What I know of life shines through my work, but no book of mine is intended to be autobiographical. It's partly ironic that the Falco series is so much about families. That said, my work has consoled me for grief and disappointment. My books will be what justify my existence. They gave me, too, financial independence to match the personal independence I had been forced to acquire.

When I was a small child, before my mother lost her happiness, she used to send me to sleep with lullabies; one was a Paul Robeson song that included the words *Do you want the moon to play with? The stars to run away with? They'll come if you don't cry …*

She did know what I became, and it was a solace for her. For me, from the moment I held the first copy of the first book, I was playing with the moon and stars.

Being a Writer

Although I had always wanted to write, and knew that I wanted to write historicals, it was only in my last year as a civil servant that I began. That was in the dark days of Thatcher's Britain, when the career I had chosen, which once had been well-paid and respected, turned into something different. Those of us who should have been overseeing how taxpayers' money was spent and advising the government on policy issues were viewed

only as numbers – unwanted numbers. Outside 'consultants' were brought in, with a remit to destroy systems and dispense with staff. We were distrusted, with our careers under threat and our rewards slashed.

I had let slip that I myself wrote for relaxation. Always a mistake. People want to know if your work has been copied up by scroll-sellers, or if you have given readings socially. Saying no shrinks your standing; saying yes makes their eyes glaze defensively. Though I mentioned that I sometimes toyed with the idea of hiring a hall to give an evening of my love poems and satires, it was said ruefully. Everyone, including me, was convinced it was a dream. [TFL]

I wrote a romantic novel to cheer myself up. I did so in secret. You should never say you are trying to write and never discuss work in progress until it is in print.

I saw an advert for the Georgette Heyer Historical Novel Prize, for unpublished manuscripts. I submitted mine, was shortlisted, and realised I might be able to do this. Not so simple – over five years, I submitted four scripts. Three reached the shortlist: one became a serial in *Woman's Realm*; one appeared ten years later as *The Course of Honour;* another was *The Silver Pigs.* I never won, not even with those two last books, now in print for decades and loved by readers around the world.

The prize deadline was always the end of August, so I wrote a book every year, ending then. Excellent training! I am, though, always as close to a deadline as I can be – ever since school where I would run down the corridor to shunt my essay into a pigeonhole, just as the teacher came to collect. I used to take my bundles up to London myself, to gain an extra day over posting them. I still hand-deliver to my agent.

After I had posted *The Course of Honour* by hand, I made my way slowly home. It was very hot. During the chillier midnight printing of my work (technology was slow back then), rather than turn the central heating back on, I had added extra clothes. I stood in Tottenham Court Road tube station, stifling in a thermal vest and a jumper. *As the girl came running up the steps, I realised she was wearing far too many clothes …*

I went home and wrote the first page of *The Silver Pigs.* I had no idea who was speaking, in what period and background, or from which steps.

This answers one question rather unhappily, because when people ask, *Where do you get your ideas?,* obviously they do not want me to say, *From a thermal vest*!

And that's where Falco came from?

Could be. According to Richard, we were watching *Miss Jones and Son*, a TV series we liked, and *he* said, *You should write about a Roman detective …*

For me, writing is a job. Ethereal forces don't provide inspiration. I had read detective stories and, significantly, heard detective dramas on radio. When I finished *The Course of Honour,* I had just finalised a large project, emptied my imagination and was ready for something new. My brain is a hot compost of ideas; many *could* be forked up, have the woodlice shaken off them and be worked into novels. Some were. Some still will be, perhaps.

For years, I kept folders with titles, disconnected paragraphs, even a page or two of dialogue between feisty heroines and covetable chaps. People who are trying to be authors are scared of letting a Big Idea escape. I had been a civil servant. My filing system is good. But none of my old folders contained anything like *The Silver Pigs.* The idea for a spoof gumshoe in the ancient world was new (and therefore exciting). I still have the old folders, though of course, now I've mentioned them, they will have to be shredded.

I came home and wrote that opening page. So I opened a new folder.

I still have that too: a beige Slimpick Wallet, slightly worn on the edges, with a few ink smears and one blob of what may be spilt tea. This folder, called 'Mickey Spartacus Notes', contains: timelines (five or six duplicates) of the First Century imperial period; lists; newspaper cuttings; a Port Guide to Civitavecchia (revised 6/84), a postcard of the Via Appia Antica; vocabularies; a Calendar of Holidays and Festivals (dated 1998); a hand-traced map of ancient Rome with coloured crayoning; and the original photo of 'Nux', a doggie who caught Richard's eye on a Greek island. There is a page of mathematical calculations, involving both linear and liquid measures, in three colours of biro, which I believe to be an olive oil sum for *A Dying Light in Corduba*. Will I ever get to use the news-clipping: *Ferret Foils Police Stake-out*? ...

Did Falco come from there?

No; I opened the folder once he turned up. I hardly ever look at it now. My filing system's purpose, as Falco might scoff, is to lie in a cupboard looking neat.

Author and agent typically relaxing, in a Rome *hosteria*

So the answer is, I don't know. Tough luck, wannabe writers who plan to steal the pattern for Knit Your Own Falco.

I wrote the first book. I found an agent. She found us a publisher. Just like that? No. Several agents turned me down. Many editors said no to Heather.

It took four years, though it seemed much longer, to see *The Silver Pigs* in print. There was a delay at the end because apparently the book was printed in China and failed to arrive on time; a slow sampan, clearly.

The Writing Day: Do you have a routine?

If I wanted to work 9 to 5, I could have stayed in a 'real' job.

My deadline is fixed. My contract is non-negotiable, says Falco to Avienus, who supposedly has 'writer's block'. *And I shall deliver on time, like a true professional. The masterpiece will be rolled up neatly and fastened with a twist of string. There will be supporting proofs, cogently explained in exquisitely constructed sentences. Informers don't hide behind 'blocks'. The guilty go before the judge.* [OB] My system is to get the work done – 100,000 words every year. This is how:

My radio alarm turns on Radio 3, the classical music programme, at 7.00; during the next hour I wake up. In the following hour I get up. Nowadays, instead of

buying my newspaper while the kettle boils I go for a healthy walk in the park and then buy it. (Not having a paper delivered derives from when I first began working at home; it makes me leave the house at least once every day and not become peculiar …)

I read the paper. I read the post. I look around the garden, I consider housework, mend stuff, do ironing. I walk upstairs to the study, turn on my computer, do financial tasks, read email. I make phone calls, write letters, order from catalogues. Then it is probably lunchtime. I turn off the computer and have lunch.

I go back. Now I write. I look at yesterday's work, polish it, move the work forward. It is concentrated. I do not mess about. When I am tired I stop.

I have a bath and my dinner. In fact I am still working. My relaxing brain will come up with really good ideas.

I do not write them down. I am off duty now. If I forget them, since I am a professional writer, I will just devise more tomorrow.

That's it.

I wake when I like … The shutters stay closed, for in the stillness and darkness I feel myself surprisingly detached from any distractions and left to myself in freedom; my eyes do not determine the direction of my thinking but, being unable to see anything, they are guided to visualise my thoughts. If I have anything on hand I work it out in my head, choosing and correcting the wording, and the amount I achieve depends on the ease or difficulty with which my thoughts can be marshalled and kept in my head. Then I call my secretary …
PLINY THE YOUNGER

Do you have a synopsis?

If I have a contract I send a few pages of notes to my UK editor, copied to my US editor if he has also bought the book. This is polite; it says what they have bought, and helps them prepare catalogues, etc. I often don't look at the outline again for a long time. My synopses are brief, though all authors differ. I hate prior detail; once I begin writing, I want the same thrill of discovery that the reader will have.

I begin at page 1 then power through. A typical Falco novel takes about four months of writing. Research continues simultaneously and may cause changes.

Do you use a computer?

I am a toolmaker's granddaughter. I use the best tools I can get.

The first thing I do when I buy a PC is to strip out all games and media samples. I do not allow email alerts. I don't listen to music; I blot out noises of fireplaces being installed or bitter cold when the boiler breaks down. I am focused.

However, if I hear screams or smell smoke nearby, I go to investigate.

Where do you work?
Once, it was on the dining-room table – in a room only about eight foot by eight. Every evening the work had to be tidied off, so dinner could be civilised.

First study, being prepared for dinner

My first Random House contract enabled me to buy a new house with its own study. By Millennium Year I had a house with a study and a library.

Study One had the airing cupboard in one corner, which I highly recommend. Hypothermia can set in when writers sit too still for too long. Other risks to health are RSI, arthritis, sight problems, headaches, weight gain and piles! The sedentary life is, literally, a killer. Working from home avoids many germs, but at public events you will gather viruses. Since by definition you have started off solitary, weird, despondent by nature and probably with the gene for hay fever and asthma, I advise writers to live close to their local surgery. Going there does give useful insights into human nature.

There are special UK tax rules for the self-employed who work at home, though these are beyond the scope of this volume. Sadly, they are beyond the scope of most writers, but I am at heart a bureaucrat. So for decent

fiscal reasons, I always edit in the dining room, read in the lounge, think in the bath, do interviews on the bedroom phone (I was once on *Today* live, while secretly in bed), keep my sewing machine in my study and spare lightbulbs in the library. Pre-meetings with my agent and editor take place in the conservatory (the meetings tend to be outside the home).

Are you forced to make a lot of changes by your editor?
Not me. He tries. I say I'll think about it.

If a word or phrase makes Oliver pull up, I generally omit or alter that passage because if he bothered to find his pencil, something there is wrong.

In twenty years he has taught me a lot and I can write now to what I know he will like (or naughtily write things he will want to correct).

For *Venus in Copper* I had two editors, which was intriguing. Oliver had moved to Arrow, a paperback imprint; I was supposed to have a hardback editor. It was decided that Oliver and Paul Sidey at Hutchinson would *both* edit the manuscript. Oliver would then discuss their joint list of suggested changes with me. (Note 'suggested'. I am sure that is how editors see it.) They had different interests so produced two completely different sets of queries; I was heartbroken by the sheer amount and ended up in tears. It made me wonder; given that usually, only one of those lists would be considered yet a perfectly acceptable book would result, could one do without *both* editors and still – after the author's final draft tweaks – have a decent book?

Of course this is heresy.

Author and editor at a Fishbourne Palace event with curator David Rudkin (togate)

Indeed! [Editor]

Do you have any influence over book jackets?
In Britain I have the 'right of consultation' – an ambiguous concept.

Publishers like to 'refresh' a long series; I've been through it many times. When one re-jacketing was planned, I asked readers, via my website, what they

thought. There were unexpected results, for instance that you *hate* the phrase 'Her new bestseller' and don't trust glowing quotes because you think money has changed hands. Scenes from the story were requested, which we did have for a while (it was really hard work for me because I had to brief the designers). Now, in anniversary year, the UK series is in four different liveries and two sizes; for those of you who want a complete collection, I can only apologise.

My US editor shows me jackets in advance, and we tweak them. On translations, sometimes I've never even seen the finished books; I'm almost never asked about their covers.

Generally, I just stick by my sad hope that people will pay for what is inside, not what gets stuck on the front. We have scanned some of the jackets [overleaf] I've had over the years just for *The Silver Pigs.* Each of these was thought by the publisher to be the best way to sell the book to readers … In fact there are common themes - plus an anachronistic Colosseum, and my name spelled wrong!

My favourite story concerned a major book chain considering the proposed jacket for *Three Hands in the Fountain*. We were on scenes from the books at the time, and that one showed Falco and Anacrites in the sewer. The retailers asked, could it be livened up; could there, for instance, be things floating in the water? I wasn't at the meeting (of course), but I heard there was a sudden silence as people worked out *what* might be floating in a sewer …

Jackets do lie: for instance, authors plead with their publishers to use a specially youthful photo.

Events

Once I was published, I had to meet the public. Juvenal had prepared me for this:

> *Some peeling dump of a hall in the suburbs, its doors all barred*
> *And bolted like the gates of a city under siege …*
> *hangers-on to sit at the end of each row, distribute the applause …*
> *pick-pockets from your chairs that have to be returned double-quick, when the performance is over …*