

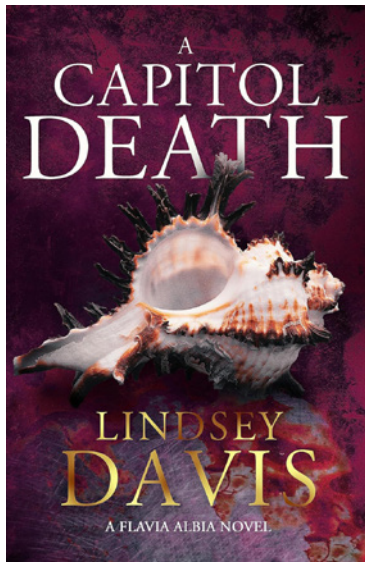
Book Review

A Capitol Death

Davis (L.), Pp. 383, map. London:
Hodder & Stoughton, 2019. Cased, £20.
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Some people believe that historical novels are a poor substitute for reading ‘proper’ history. I am not someone who subscribes to this view and have always actively encouraged my students to engage with historical fiction if this is something they enjoy. The main reason for this is that it is reading such books which sparked my own love of the classical world. Indeed, it was my Year 8 Latin teacher who suggested Lindsey Davis’ Marcus Didius Falco series, who I must thank for the position I now find myself in. Falco’s

witty adventures have been a constant in my life since I picked up *The Silver Pigs* in 1993. *A Capitol Death* is the seventh book in the Flavia Albia series - a spin-off which features the feisty adoptive daughter of Falco, now a grown woman and private investigator in her own right.

Davis’ books are always well researched and offer the reader an excellent insight into life in Imperial Rome. Flavia Albia works during the reign of the sinister Emperor Domitian, a period which the author has explored elsewhere in a standalone novel *Master and God*. For engaged students such works are a great starting point,

hopefully encouraging further interest and historical inquiry. What I especially enjoyed about this instalment was that the story is set during the days leading up to Domitian’s double triumph of 89 AD. Although there are questions over the actual logistics of such an event, Davis gives a colourful and inventive interpretation of how preparations might have proceeded. There is consideration of fun questions such as how the triumphing Emperor might be able to relieve himself during the long procession and how numerous foreign prisoners might have been ‘found’ in Rome, given the very real fact that Domitian’s military victory was, at best, questionable. As usual, Davis has an irreverent approach to the figures of authority and the readers find themselves cheering for the underdogs in the story.

The plot of this book is that a murder has taken place and Flavia Albia is tasked with investigating it. Specifically, an imperial official has been flung from the Tarpeian Rock, in a parody of the ancient punishment for traitors. Much of the action takes place on the eponymous Capitol and a handy map of this area has been provided to help the reader make sense of the geography of the main storyline. This is a book which took me a while to read as I often became interested in a little fact which had been dropped in and I was curious enough to go away and research it. Flavia Albia is a good protagonist as she is, effectively, an outsider within Roman society herself as she was originally a British orphan, adopted and schooled into polite society by the Didii. This makes her explanation to the reader of certain features of Roman life seem more authentic- something that many historical novels struggle to achieve.

As usual with Davis’ novels, there is a riotous cast of eccentric characters. It would be difficult to keep control of these, but for a cast list at the beginning of the book, which I found myself flipping back to regularly. The pace of the book is snappy and there is a good amount of action including a second murder, some humorous scenes involving Juno’s Sacred Geese and even an insight into the production of imperial purple cloth. Certainly, there must be some suspension of belief: it seems unlikely that women in Rome genuinely had the freedom afforded to the heroine of the story. However, this is why Davis’ books have been popular for so long: they have clever storylines, likeable characters and interesting yet obviously despicable villains. This is cosy crime at its best and can be enjoyed after a long day of more serious academic pursuits. However, this book will undoubtedly leave you with questions about minor logistics which you will feel compelled to investigate after finishing it. I enjoyed this immensely and look forward to reading the next few in the series.

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