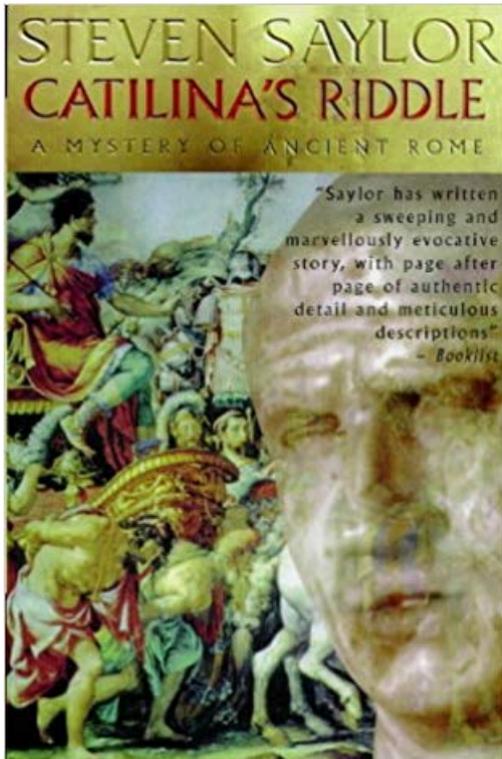


Catilina's Riddle *by* Steven Saylor



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Reviews of the *Catilina's Riddle* *by* Steven Saylor

Cordaron

This is the longest, densest, and oddest of the Roma Sub Rosa series. It contains relatively little dialog, much introspection on the nature of Roman politics and Roman virtue, detailed accounts of the processes of Roman government and legal life (voting, debate in the senate, the extremely detailed and obscure campaign laws, coming-of-age ceremonies, process and applications of augury, etc.), and Hamlet-like vacillation over whether Gorianus, as pater familias is doing the right thing by his family and raising his son Meto properly.

What Catalina's Riddle doesn't contain, however, is a mystery. Technically, there is one: across 500 pages we have three bodies left on Gordianus' farm, clearly intended as a threat of some sort. It gets mentioned every few chapters. Gordianus doesn't do any actual "finding" (his word for what we'd

call "detecting") until the last few pages of the book, after the real story is over.

The real story in the book is the Cataline Conspiracy. It's one of the most famous, fascinating, and important events in all Roman history. One can even make a clear argument that it's the no-turning-back point in the collapse of the Republic. Plus, it has some of the most wonderful muck-raking in history. Cicero's nasty hyperbole about the co-conspirators (gathering to drink blood, plotting to kill people in the night to incite revolution, killing husbands to seduce wives and extract their money, etc.) is matched only by Cicero's peacock-proud parading of himself as the only true servant of Rome.

If you want a readable account of the conspiracy (Saylor has never been a Cicero apologist, so expect a sympathetic view of Catalina's motives, if not his actions), a good account of details of Roman life (including some harsh observations on the Roman ideal of country living), some good observations on Roman morals, and a great time with the Gordianus family, it's a great book. The history lessons are a bit excessive, but never go on too long. The navel-gazing gets a bit much at times, but that has always been a trait of the character. There isn't nearly enough Bethesda, although we get a *lot* of just-of-age Meto and his trying to find his own way in the world, being unsuited to following in his father's and Eco's footsteps and his family not understanding what he truly wants to do.

If you only want the mystery, skip to the next book. It makes what happened clear enough (you really just need to know where Meto wound up and that's abundantly clear when you need to know it). But be warned, from this point on the series gets more political and introspective. The action level does pick up a lot, though.

Foginn

This is one of Steven Saylor's excellent "Gordianus the Finder" series of novels set in Republican Rome. It truly constitutes superb entertainment at several levels. Firstly, this novel is permeated with extremely insightful observations concerning the basic nature of Republican Roman society. We see Rome as a society with certain recognizable features of our own, but still shockingly different from Western culture. Slavery, a rigid class system, a thoroughly corrupt system of justice, and a dysfunctional economic system are among the chronic problems of ancient Rome. This novel explains much of this without boring the reader. To the contrary, Saylor's discussions of Roman society and government are fascinating.

Equally fascinating is the plot of this novel. The story is told in the first person by Gordianus the Finder, who is essentially a professional investigator. Here, Gordianus is asked to do certain favors for Consul of Rome Marcus Tullius Cicero. Specifically, Cicero asks Gordianus to play host to Lucius Sergius Catilina, Cicero's sworn enemy. The reasons are complex, and in this novel Gordianus finds himself becoming enmeshed against his will in violent Roman politics of the highest nature.

This novel moves at a leisurely pace, in common with most or all of the Gordianus the Finder novels. This will put off some readers, but I found myself enjoying every page of the novel. This one is an excellent read, made even better by the fact that the author has something to say. Catilina is a controversial figure in Roman political history and to this day historians argue about whether he was the rogue that Cicero made him out to be. What we see in this novel is that the ruling Roman aristocracy is smothering the middle and lower classes and political change is inevitable. Perhaps Catilina was trying, with many allies, to effect this change. As the "Afterword" in this novel points out, Catilina was the loser and the histories were written by his enemies. Likely we will never fully understand the man or his intentions.

Author Saylor's portrayal of the aristocratic Claudius family is hilarious. Saylor clearly has little use

for the Roman upper classes as he believes they existed in late Republican Rome.

The gradual pace of this novel is offset by the fact that it neatly ties up most of its loose ends in a startling and entertaining fashion that most readers will appreciate. Besides being good history, this novel is also excellent storytelling.

Highly recommended. RJB.

Crazy

This sets apart from the Sub Rosa series in scope and heft. The historical moment often overtakes the mystery, and is treated with a loving fascination by the author, as the protagonist navigates a particularly thorny period, struggling with his own compass. No easy answers here. A fine mystery and a true achievement as a historical novel.

Adrierdin

First I think this book was too long. Not sure what I would cut, but it dragged in places. I read in a day, but still had trouble remembering what little things happened in the beginning. That said I enjoyed both parts of the book the story of Catalina and the mystery of headless corpses on the farm. I am reading the next now, but not sure how much further I am going to go, maybe a new time period will be a good change of pace. Overall, just really heavy tone.

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