



The Course of Honor

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Rome in the first century A.D. saw the corrupt and bloody reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, as well as the Year of the Four Emperors. It also saw the rise of Vespasian, the destitute son of a provincial senator who brought peace to the empire after years of strife, court intrigue, and murder. Written from the perspective of Caenis, a female slave who was Vespasian's forbidden love, the future emperor advances in his climactic struggle for power. But as Vespasian brings hope to the people of Rome...he brings only despair to the one woman who loves him most.

The Course of Honor Details

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Author : Lindsey Davis

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Terence says

Lindsey Davis likes Vespasian. She likes him a great deal as even a cursory reading of her *M Didius Falco* series proves.

I like Vespasian. Among Rome's many rulers, he ranks up there – in my opinion – with Augustus, Aurelian and Septimius Severus. And if I had the opportunity to have dinner with any emperor, he'd be the one I'd like to sit down with (or recline in the case of a Roman meal).

But *Course of Honor** is not Vespasian's story. It's the story of the woman he loved – the freedwoman Antonia Caenis. From what little we know of her, she appears to have enjoyed an unprecedented relationship with Vespasian. One extraordinary enough to warrant at least passing mention in the histories that have come down to us. One which, given our lack of sources, is ripe for exploration.

Fortunately, Davis is up to the job as she recounts Caenis' life from her first meeting with Vespasian to their final reunion when he became emperor. Davis focuses on the personal relationship between Caenis and Vespasian and does a good job of making both of them real people, Caenis particularly. The tone of the writing is more serious than the author's *Falco* books but the emphasis on developing interesting characters over plot remains, which – in this case – is a good thing.

And Davis' skill at putting you in ancient Rome remains as well.

Overall, *Course of Honor* gets a recommendation from me, especially if you want to read about a romance that doesn't involve heaving bosoms, ripped bodices and iron-thewed men.

After all, this is our protagonist's love interest:

* I have the American edition, so we lost the “u”.

Nicky Moxey says

I find it unbelievable (but very heartening, for my own literary efforts) that this, Ms Davis' first novel, struggled to find a publisher. I much prefer it to her Falco books, for instance. I love the delicacy with which the relationship's distances are played out; and I'm planning on stealing her handling of time passing for my next novel. A lovely, intricate, sensitive read.

Malacima says

3.5-4 stars

M.R. says

One of the things I enjoyed about this novel was that it was thoroughly grounded in actual history and that this added rather than detracted from the love story because it gave the tale perspective. Moreover, both characters accepted that Vespasian had to follow the *cursus honorum* if he was ever to make anything of himself. Here are two intelligent people drawn to each other but knowing they can never marry if one or both are to succeed and be self-supporting; yet later in life, they manage to reunite when he is widowed and can do as he likes because he has become the ultimate power, which has not corrupted him as it did previous others. A remarkable story, really, and all the more fascinating because it was true, for the most part. Not to mention that Davis is one hell of a good storyteller in addition to a deft writer who incorporates history without being heavy handed about it. An excellent read.

Minni Mouse says

DNF at 27% because I lost interest. Whereas Kate Quinn can write her historical fictions with passion and cruelty -- all the while staying close to true events and true history -- *Course of Honor* felt like regular history.

The writing was detached and unbiased -- which worked effectively in *Mistress of Rome* -- but in this book it read as dry and factual as a textbook. Rich in historical accuracy, sure, but if I wanted non-fiction I would have grabbed non-fiction.

Linda says

3.75 stars

As old as time, slavery has always existed in one or another. This is the story of two young people who meet for the first time over the comforting scent of food. A sausage in particular. Vespasian and his brother are soldiers wandering through Rome when they smell something delicious. They are humbled when they meet Caenis, a young slave, who shares the meager portion of her meal with them. Vespasian will remember this special woman.

Caenis belonged to Antonia, a high-ranking woman. Both intelligent and cautious, her job was to write letters for her mistress. Eventually she would become Antonia's favorite. This allowed her luxuries that few slaves had such as companionship.

When Vespasian returned to Rome two years later, he sought her out. The strange part was there was an antiquated law issued by a now-dead emperor that forbade soldiers from having relationships with slaves and freed-people. Given permission to meet with him, Caenis is both leery and happy while in Vespasian's presence. She knows that any suspicious act is justification to be put to death.

Vespasian is turned away on several occasions by Caenis but it is for his own good. She is as much concerned about him as she is for herself. Each time they see each other their relationship matures. "They

had become confederates. They were talking like two outsiders from society. They talked for months they had already missed and the period of Vespasian's coming tour; openly and easily, sharing rudeness and laughter, discovery and surprise; until lunchtime, and into the afternoon. They talked until they were tired."

The plot of *The Course of Honor* covered most of Caenis's life. My biggest complaint was getting use to the author's clipped form of speech that her characters use periodically. Also, some might be turned off by Caenis's form of arrogance when she dealt with others. But caution comes to mind, she never took anything for granted; she was raised as a slave after all. Other than that, Ms. Davis did a good job letting me take a glimpse into an era that few people write about. Her description of everyday life felt spot-on. Several times she managed to make me lose track that I was reading a book.

Be aware that this is first and foremost a book on historical fiction. It covered a horrifying time if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time: no one was safe. (view spoiler)

If you are expecting a wild romance with passion, look elsewhere. This is about *the course of honor* or *cursus honorum*, Latin for course of offices, and how it influenced men who aspired to hold public office during Roman times. Ms. Davis wrote an entertaining narrative. It contains flawed main characters; neither of them was beautiful or perfect. The setting is unusual and there is some delicious word-play. Take yourself out of your comfort zone, like I did, and give this book a try.

If you enjoy Ms. Davis's style of writing, she has written a mystery series with a witty detective named Marcus Didius Falco that works on cases during Vespasian's reign as emperor.

Molly says

Writing: 2/5

Plot: 3/5

Pacing: 2/5

RATING: 2.5/5 (Rounded up to a 3/5)

When I first stumbled upon this book, I was super excited to get my hands on it and start reading it. For one, I'm an avid fan of anything ancient Rome, and two, I'm fascinated with the Emperor Vespasian; there was such a piece of melodrama in his death, with him going out saying "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god!" Allured by the promise of Vespasian, I ran right to this book... And I was sorely let down. I'll try to say the good things about it first, I suppose.

I enjoyed seeing the cast of familiar historical faces: the Julio-Claudians and the Flavians. I was also quite happy with how they dealt with the Emperor Claudius in particular, and the interactions between Caenis and the children of Vespasian were actually somewhat enjoyable to read, when the author was showing, and not telling. There was definitely a comprehension of the era, which I appreciate and admire, but that also just so happened to be a downfall.

As another reviewer mentioned, there's something about Lindsey Davis' writing style that really irks me. It's overly simplistic, the dialogue is stilted ("What an interesting girl!"), and there are many randomly italicized pieces of text, which is quite off-putting. It was rather disengaging. The plot - which could have amazing potential in more skilled hands - was dragging, humdrum, and lacklustre. The plot did occasionally break off in order for Davis to indulge in history lessons. This made it somewhat jarring and incredibly uninteresting

to read; at best, it was decent, at worst, it was unbearably dry. The text is also crammed full of anachronisms that made me cringe to read, such as Vespasian calling Caenis "lass" since he's just a "country boy." Also, in general, I found Caenis to be a despicable character. She smacks of being a Mary Sue.

Let it be known that I don't hate this book. It's just... Meh.

Jeanette says

My favorite Lindsey Davis and now I read it was her early work left in a drawer for 20 years.

Excellent detail and all the quirks of human psychological attitudes- always both, bring stories of 2000 years ago in the past- fresh to this very day. With such connection to our manipulations of human power/association/communication that you begin to understand that only the clothes, style and "stuff" we tend to use most of our days, are all that different.

Jane says

This is Davis' retelling of the lifelong love between Vespasian and Antonia Caenis. He was proceeding through the *cursus honorum* [Course of honour], a graduated series of political positions which Roman patrician or equestrian young men would follow, from aedile to senator with possibility to rise to Consul. Caenis was a slave/amenuensis then freedwoman to Antonia, mother of Emperor Claudius. Caenis' personality and actions are purely from Davis's imagination. Caenis is mentioned only briefly in Suetonius and there also remains a funerary stone with her name and inscription on it erected by her freedman. Vespasian, his actions, and the main events surrounding him are based on an extensive passage in Suetonius.

The couple maintains their love over decades; she becomes his mistress before his marriage. When he marries, she breaks off their affair. After his wife dies, he seeks out Caenis after many years. They become lovers again and she his concubine when he becomes emperor: as Suetonius puts it: "wife in all but name" until her death in the mid-70s. Roman marriage law forbade marriage between people of their respective classes. This is a beautiful story with no graphic descriptions. I usually don't read love stories, but this was a marvellous exception, the story of two strong, decent people. I only wonder why the historical Emperor Vespasian never changed that law...

Sarah says

Something about Lindsey Davis' writing style really bugs me. Large chunks of this novel consisted of her abandoning her lacklustre plot to retell Roman history in her own words, which to me misses the point of historical fiction. Write a history book if you really find it that fascinating, DAVIS! Plus, the hero and heroine were always spouting the cheesiest one-liners at each other and I kept coming across entire sentences in italics for no reason at all.

Daniel Kukwa says

An intimate epic: a sweeping, old fashioned romance, tucked into a car on the titanic historical roller coaster that is the Roman Empire under the Julio-Claudians. The author does occasionally resort to some Dickensian over-writing, but it doesn't detract from this wonderful tale of love, friendship, and finding one's destiny. It makes a superb companion to Robert Graves "I Claudius" novels.

Kendra says

When I picked this book up from the library and saw its hand-drawn, almost cartoonish cover, I figured I was in for just another random historical fiction novel. One I would finish reading, shrug, and say, *Meh*. (Yes, I totally judged a book by the cover.)

Wrong. So very wrong.

The amount of books that have made me cry are relatively small in number (maybe six or seven), so imagine my surprise when this assumed to be *meh* book had me leaking from the eyes like nobody's business!

When Caenis and Vespasian first got together, I thought, "They are perfect together! This will be such a cute book." But when (view spoiler), for some reason it was as if someone turned on a tiny faucet behind my eyes. Just the way it was written, I guess, tugged at my heartstrings a whole lot.

It's hard, at first, learning to live without the one you love, and Caenis does it (for **twenty frigging years!**), but even as she lives without him, occasional sightings are like a punch to the heart (hers *and* mine).

So fast forward those twenty years. Reading it, even when Caenis wasn't doing anything in particular, I was very melancholy on her behalf. But then (thankfully?) someone dies and Vespasian comes back to Caenis. Cue the tears of happiness!

I really enjoyed Veronica, her best friend since they were ten, who also buys her freedom and sets up a very exclusive brothel. (Is it weird that that seemed like an awesome idea?) She is a delightfully comedic constant throughout Caenis's life and just thinking about her passing away with her oldest friend beside her makes me want to cry. (Ahem, again.)

When Vespasian is declared Emperor, Caenis doesn't want to cause him any scandal so she writes him a letter saying that they can't be together anymore and moves back into her old house. Pretty much from that letter until the end of the book, I was in tears, sad ones and then very happy. It didn't matter that these were characters (of real people, which makes it that much more of a happy ending) from thousands of years ago; the author was able to create characters that I really liked and could empathize with, and I would read it all over again, uncontrollable eye leaking and all.

Krystina says

It has been a long time since I stayed up all night reading, but this wonderful book by Ms. Davis tore me away from the hardcover biographies that I have read for years and returned me to the wonderful world of

Historical Fiction. While not a romance novel, this is very much a great love story that leaves the reader hoping that this is how things actually played out in the First Century C.E.

Ms. Davis's grasp on the history and feel of the ancient world is enveloping, but it also allows readers to almost imagine themselves in this world: to feel the cares and concerns of its occupants, to believe that doing the right thing, while sometimes not the easiest, can result in happiness in the long term. It is realistic approach to duty, love, and goals. It is a story of a relationship where both parties demonstrate true agency, but is also honest in its poignancy. I only wish that she had stretched it out and turned it into a series. I feel as if I will read and re-read this book for years to come.

Desiree says

Loved Caenis!

Very interesting character portrait of the freedwoman who became the Roman Emperor Vespasian's concubine. Makes me want to read a biography about her.

Gaile says

Titus Flavius Vespanianus meets Caenis, a slave girl in their youth. Caenis knows she is not beautiful but she is clever and she had been plucked from other slave girls to be educated.

Now secretary to Antonia, the widow of the son of the Empress Livia, Caenis is without illusions.

She knows she is not beautiful. She knows she is a worthless slave. Vespanianus has ambitions in politics. Never once does Caenis hold him back but never does she go against her principles.

Caenis lives through nine emperors. She achieves the status of freed woman and is at last able to purchase her own home. Meanwhile Vespanius is posted to distant regions, marries another and has children.

During this time they remain in love. The story meanders between politics, the antics of each succeeding emperor, one of whom is Nero and the love between Caenis and Vespasian.

Somewhat dryly written and often showing rather than telling, only the desire to know the fate of Caenis kept me reading.

Caenis actually lived and if you know Roman history, you know what happened to Vespanius.

I do not really care for the writing style of Ms Davis. Unlike her series this book does have the background and feel of ancient Rome except when Vespanius calls Caenis, "lass," when I abruptly think of Scotland which is still far in the future. The word, "lass'" is incongruous to the time in which this novel is set.
