



The Great Game

S.J.A. Turney

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Promoted to the elite Praetorian Guard in the thick of battle, a young legionary is thrust into a seedy world of imperial politics and corruption. Tasked with uncovering a plot against the newly-crowned emperor Commodus, his mission takes him from the cold Danubian border all the way to the heart of Rome, the villa of the emperor's scheming sister, and the great Colosseum.

What seems a straightforward, if terrifying, assignment soon descends into Machiavellian treachery and peril as everything in which young Rufinus trusts and believes is called into question and he faces warring commanders, Sarmatian cannibals, vicious dogs, mercenary killers and even a clandestine Imperial agent. In a race against time to save the Emperor, Rufinus will be introduced, willing or not, to the great game.

"Entertaining, exciting and beautifully researched" - Douglas Jackson

"From the Legion to the Guard, from battles to the deep intrigue of court, Praetorian: The Great Game is packed with great characters, wonderfully researched locations and a powerful plot." - Robin Carter

The Great Game Details

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From Reader Review The Great Game for online ebook

Greg McElroy says

New view

This Roman thriller gives you a look at the empire from a different perspective. One of the Praetorean guards, the elite of the Roman army.

Very captivating tale. Especially if you have an interest in ancient Rome.

Strongly recommend!

Tony Giannattasio says

Bondus, Iacomus Bondus

Seeking a book about ancient Rome and the legions fighting barbarian tribes, this is NOT your book. Rather this is a James Bond version of ancient Rome in the time of the emperor Commodus. While there is some fighting between the legions and the barbarians at the beginning of the book, the book quickly shifts to Rome and the political infighting that takes place among the emperor and various parts of his Court and advisers. So if you enjoy the James Bond books and books of that type this will be a good read for you. If you would rather read about the Roman legions facing various enemies of Rome there are many other series to choose from.

Larry Loveday says

Overall a good read

I enjoyed the book a great deal, although at times it seemed to bog down a little with some of the graphic details of the fight scenes and the like. But overall I loved how the author took actual people of ancient history, a true story for that matter, and tweaked it just enough to tell his version of history. I will read the other books in this series.

Alex Gough says

Praetorian: The Great Game, by SJA Turney

SJA Turney, writer of the well-loved and extensive Marius' Mules series, has brought us the first in a new series, with a brand new hero and a new time period. Turney tells us in his author notes that he wanted to write a re-appraisal of an emperor that history has treated unkindly, and he settled on Commodus, the nemesis of Russell Crowe's Gladiator. In Turney's hands, Commodus is a much more sympathetic character, trying hard to follow the class act that was his father, Marcus Aurelius, one of Rome's greatest ever emperors.

The hero of the tale however is Rufinus, a tough, brave and most importantly loyal young legionary who is promoted to the Praetorian Guard as a reward for an act of bravery. He is quickly earmarked for more clandestine work than simply being the Emperor's bodyguard, and has to infiltrate a plot against the unsuspecting Commodus. Various dangerous encounters complicate his task, and soon he is in a race against time to save the Emperor's life.

Praetorian has all the hallmarks of a great Simon Turney novel, excellent research, great story-telling bringing the period to life, a fast pace and an interesting new hero to root for. Great read.

Robin Carter says

Review

When Simon said he was writing a new Roman series i worried that it would be Fronto by another name, something so easy to do when you have a series as successful as Marius Mules. Simon very generously involved me in his writing process, sending me the book in very early stages for comment and feedback (he knows i love that sort of thing, and pretends i add value). This allowed me to see Rufinus evolve, and soon dispelled any concerns about a carbon copy of Marius Mules, this was something new, something sharp and intelligent, full of intrigue, but still laden with Simon's sharp wit and mischievous humour.

Rufinus takes the reader from the Legion to the Guard, from battles to the deep intrigue of court, Praetorian: The Great Game is packed with great characters, wonderfully researched locations and a powerful plot that fans have come to associate with Simon Turney.

This truly is the start of something new and special i highly recommend it

(Parm)

Series

Marius' Mules

1. The Conquest of Gaul (2009)
aka The Invasion of Gaul
2. The Belgae (2010)
3. Gallia Invicta (2011)
4. Conspiracy of Eagles (2012)
5. Hades' Gate (2013)
6. Caesar's Vow (2014)
7. The Great Revolt (2014)
- Prelude to War (2014)

Tales of the Empire

1. Interregnum (2009)
2. Ironroot (2010)
3. Dark Empress (2011)

Ottoman Cycle

1. The Thief's Tale (2013)
2. The Priest's Tale (2013)

3. The Assassin's Tale (2014)

Novels

Praetorian: The Great Game (2015)

Jane says

Exciting, heart-stopping action-adventure! A young legionary, Rutilius, saves the life of a prefect of the Praetorians and as a reward, is made a Praetorian himself. He is tasked to infiltrate the court surrounding Emperor Commodus's sister Lucilla now living at the exotic and expansive villa of Emperor Hadrian. He goes undercover as a mercenary, to infiltrate and to discover a plot to assassinate Commodus. His first attempt ends in failure but he is sent back to finish his assignment and to warn the emperor in time. I was breathless at the last few chapters where he overhears the plot, what he does to eavesdrop on the cabal and at what follows. The torture scene was gruesome enough I had to pause then resume later, although the book as a whole was a page-turner. In my opinion, Rutilius is superior to the author's previous Roman military hero, the too-perfect [and silly] Fronto. Rutilius is more human; he can be a klutz [which serves him well in one attack] and when faced with the choice of killing his nemesis, the bully Scopius, cannot do so, as well as he chooses not to kill a roommate at the villa when he has the opportunity. This shows his innate decency. There were some things that stretched credulity, for example, a couple of *deus ex machina* episodes and although wounds were serious, they seemed to heal quickly enough that he could participate in the final scenes, racing against time to warn and save the emperor. Galloping from the villa on horseback so badly injured!? Some other inconsistencies. I am eager to read more Rutilius.

Highly recommended.

David Baird says

I was kindly gifted a copy of this book by the author and I can honestly say I was not disappointed. I've read a few books now in the same genre and many start slowly building up as they go along... not this one. Thrust straight into the action with our hero saving the life of a Praetorian prefect.

This starts the whole journey for Rufinus as he is promoted to the Praetorian guard after meeting the emperor. This sudden promotion gains him some new friends but also enemies!

We see Rufinus deal with these enemies the only way he knows how.. his fists! We then see a feud escalate. Not to give away anything I particularly liked the way Rufinus dealt with this situation.

Now Rufinus is chosen to save the emperor from a suspected plot against him. During this we see him struggle with being deceitful whilst also trying to gain favour in order to get closer to those who are suspected to be plotting against the emperor.

There are so many twists and turns along the way that the book kept me gripped and I honestly had no idea if Rufinus would succeed in his task or not.

The ending to the book did not disappoint either; I have no trouble recommending this book to anyone. It was a fantastic read.

The chapters flowed well, the characters relationships grew before your eyes. You could see alliances and friendships forming. The author clearly put a lot of time and effort into this book and it shows

One thing I really loved about this book is that I took an instant dislike to one of the Praetorian prefects, the other I really liked. I found as I went along and Rufinus made discoveries along the way my opinion of the

prefects changed. It was amazing to see how easily Simon managed to change my viewpoint as a reader so quickly.

Simon clearly knows his stuff, the book was brilliantly written from my stand point. I couldn't pick anything I didn't like or even anything I would have elaborated further on. It was simply a brilliant book and one of the best I've had the pleasure of reading.

If you do one thing today make sure you buy the book. It's well worth the money
Last comment is directly for Simon.. My next pet will definitely be named Acheron!

Deborah Foulkes says

It's no secret that I am big fan of Turney ' s work and this was another great read. The characters are believable on ones that you can really get on board with. The descriptive language as well as dialogue is cleverly written that it's impossible not to fly effortlessly into the world he's weaved. A true contender with all the other greats such as Scarrow, Sidebottom and Kane.

Keep writing.

Paul Bennett says

Wow, this is sure exciting stuff. Who would have thought that me, a humble yet insightful reader and reviewer of books, would make it to the most prestigious blog tour of SJA Turney? I have known Simon for a couple years now, a relationship brought forth through the great bringer together of old friends and maker of new ones, social media. In fact, it is his fault I have a Twitter account. I had finished reading *Marius Mules IV* and noticed in the About the Author section that Simon listed his Twitter handle. Well, I enjoyed the first four books in the series so much I just had to tell him and @hooverbkreview was born and began what has become a pretty cool network of authors, reviewers and other fellow travelers. Soon I had inveigled my way into his confidence and got on his list of beta readers which is really nice because I get a signed copy of the books and I know that they will be worth a small fortune at some point in the future. So if my writing career doesn't take off then I have those signed editions to fall back on in my retirement and now I'll have one more as I have just finished his latest, *Praetorian: The Great Game*.

Where to begin? The protagonist, Rufinus, the depth of scenic detail, the mesmerizing plot twists? That sounds like a logical order to proceed with. Rufinus is your average legionary doing the foot slogging, shield walling duties of a Roman soldier all for the glory of Rome and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Then in one of those 'no good deed goes unpunished' moments his life takes a radical detour. Without going into too much detail as to not spoil it, Rufinus is promoted to The Praetorian Guard and is subsequently posted undercover at Commodus' sister Lucilla's villa. From then on he finds out just what kind of man and loyal soldier he is. He is tested time and time again managing to emerge stronger as a character after each ordeal, physically, emotionally and rationally. A fascinating character developed beautifully by the author. That holds true for the rest of the cast of characters as well. The two Praetorian Prefects, Paternus and Perennis, the dark and visceral Dis and the savage beast called Tad are just a few of the more interesting players.

I have found over the past few years that Simon has a great ability to transport the reader to the places he is describing, whether that is the Emperor's Palace in Rome, the various monuments and temples but most especially the Imperial Villa at Tibur. I felt as if I was walking the grounds taking in the opulence of the imperial sections, the contrasting slave quarters and even the hypocaust system. This descriptive flair is also

evident in his turns of phrase. For example an exclamation uttered by one the characters: 'by the seven sacred shits of Jove.' Or when after setting the scene with a gate guard suffering from intestinal distress meeting Acheron, Rufinus' hound from Hades. The result: 'The guard's bowels surrendered.' Maybe it's just me but I burst out laughing when I read those tasty tidbits. :-)

The pace of the story moves along readily and builds to an exciting climax and has within it moments when I would pause and say 'okay, I didn't see that coming.' Rest assured that you will be entertained and maybe even educated a little about the world of Gnaeus Marcius Rustius Rufinus.

I vow by the seven sacred you know what's that this is a 5 star winner.

Let's all give a big Hoover Book Review welcome to today's guest, Simon Turney. Welcome, Simon and thanks for taking the time to answer a few questions from this humble yet insightful reader and reviewer of books.

How does it feel to have *Praetorian* published after such a long interval between conception and publication? Oooh.... Exciting! Yes, definitely exciting. I've long believed it's my strongest novel and that it would be well received, and I've been dying to let readers see it for a long time (Oo-err!) It's like having an amazing hat but only being allowed to wear it in private (weird analogy? You bet!) It's been a long road for *Praetorian* and it's not quite the book in started as, largely due to the talented editing of my agent Sallyanne, who turned it from a lump of quartz to a diamond. But the very best thing about it being out there? I have had the plots for books 2 and 3 sitting in a folder on my PC for a year now. I've even done the research trip, taken the photos and investigated the locations for book 2. I've been ready to write it for more than half a year, but it's not been worth launching into until book 1 was in publication. Now... I can start on book 2 (working title: *The Emperor's Man*)

I have been impressed in all of your work with the amount of descriptive detail you include in the surroundings, the architecture and just the way you put the reader inside the luxuriousness of a place like the Villa Hadrianus. When you visit a site for a book how long does it typically take until you have enough inspiration for your imagination? In other words how do you bring to life a site that has stood idle for centuries?

Funnily enough, this is to some extent the subject of a guest post I did a couple of days ago for <https://forwinternights.wordpress.com/> ... I'm a great believer that a scene in a book feels a great deal more real if the author has put their heart and soul into the location, and the best way to do that is to experience the place yourself. I try and visit every location I use (it's not always possible, but I do my best.) When I visit a location, first of all I have my camera to hand at all times. I take a lot of photos. That means that when I come to write about it, probably months later, I can refer back to see, for instance, whether one building is visible from another, and such like. I also pay attention to smells, sounds, terrain and wildlife. Are there terrapins in the pond? Do you break into a sweat on the angle of approach? Is there the scent of jasmine in the air? These are the things that bring a location to life. Of course, the amount of detail you throw into the scene is a fine line too, since loading it down with too much can impede the pace, but a good description turns a scene from 'mmmm' to 'wow!' Because of the different senses I need to record, as well as my camera, I carry a dictaphone, on which I keep seemingly endless notes. I am careful enough in selecting locations that it never takes long for inspiration to strike. If I cannot see the scene in my mind's eye within minutes, it's the wrong location! As for the bringing to life a long-dead site, I would suggest readers pop

over to forwinterights and read the blog I posted, which goes into some detail on that.

In any story involving the Roman Legions there is going to be violence and to bring the reader into what it is like to stand in a legion shield wall or even in a street fight there has to be some blood and gore. Do you ever question any of the gory passages you write as to whether it might be too much?

Oh yes. In fact, while it's nothing to do with battle, there is a torture scene in Praetorian that is a vastly toned-down version of the original. My editor suggested I cut it down and she was, in retrospect, correct. Even now, going back over the original makes me wince and makes my eyes water! Similarly, in The Pasha's Tale, which has just undergone its final edit, I have completely removed a scene in which a household of civilians is cut down. It was, in the end, seemingly too much for the tale, and so joined so many other scenes in 'File 13'. Oddly, I don't think I've ever toned down a battle scene. Battle is in its very nature brutal, and those people who are reading a novel about the legions at war are almost certainly expecting such vicious description. In fact, some of my readers have expressed disappointment at lack of violent bloodshed from time to time. What I am turning away from more often is non-battle brutality, since scenes like that are far more shocking and unpleasant.

Another facet of your writing that I enjoy is your usage of colorful phrases. For example, the seven sacred shits of Jove. How do you come up with these nuggets?

Simply: I have no idea! I have a peculiar imagination as anyone who knows me will verify. I tend to be very inventive with my phrases even at home. I have been known to shout things like 'Turdhoney!' when I drop an egg on the pantry floor. Words just fit together so well into odd phrases even if they shouldn't. More so, if they shouldn't. I trained with the best, mind. My German housemate at University initiated the phrase 'suppurating, buggering heck!' which remains one of my faves. Cursing and swearing can be horribly offensive and it irritates me to hear people using gratuitous bad language out in the streets. But somehow the offensiveness of an imprecation is inversely proportional to the humour within. If what you shout when you drop a rock on your toe is odd or funny enough, people will laugh rather than taking offense.

Do you have plans to see what's in store for Rufinus?

Hmm. I nodded to this with your first question, didn't I? There are years of fun ahead for Rufinus. For a start, books 2 and 3 will see him variously at the family estate in Hispania, in southern Gaul, in Rome and Ostia, and even out in the wilds of Dacia (modern Romania.) There are still an array of dangerous men in the Roman court, including a couple of well-placed men whose actions will change the course of Commodus' reign. Be sure that Rufinus has a part to play with them. And over in Dacia sometime soon, two future usurping emperors are busy. Book 2 is already planned down to a chapter level ready to write and book 3 is a nebulous plot at the moment. Beyond that? Well, the sky's the limit. As with Marius' Mules, as long as people want to read about Rufinus, I'm happy to write about him.

Finally, what's next for Simon Turney? What are you working on now?

I am just putting the finishing touches to The Pasha's Tale (the fourth and final installment of the Ottoman Cycle) which I will publish once the cover is complete, with a tear in my eye as I say goodbye to writing about 15th century Istanbul. Next week I begin work in earnest on Marius' Mules VIII: Sons of Taranis, which I am already champing at the bit over. That should be out in the late summer this year, all being well. After that, sometime towards the end of the year, it is the turn of Praetorian book 2. In the meantime, there are three side projects already written and waiting for publishing, including the joint work with Gordon Doherty, which is one of my favourite things I've ever written. Shortly, we are going to embark on book 2 of that series too. All go at Chez Turney as you can see! Never a dull moment.

Leonard Bacica says

Having become a big fan of Simon's Marius' Mules series, I have been privileged enough to read Praetorian: The Great Game, his latest book, before its launch yesterday.

Coming at it from halfway through the Fronto saga I expected, with reasonable variation, more of the same. And it is more of the same in some very broad aspects: historical fiction, based on historical facts and set in the Roman Empire, with the same insane level of documentation and detail, so very accurate that it is impossible to catch the author off-guard, save maybe for a few debatable turns of phrases.

But in many other regards it is a completely different type of book. And the most striking difference is that, while the adventures of Caesar's army in Gaul is a story of truly epic proportions, comprising a vast number of characters, huge armies and battles that became turning points in history, Praetorian is mostly an individual story. It is, if you want, Ulysses' Odyssey to the all-encompassing Iliad. Schindler's List vs Saving Private Ryan, if we're talking WWII movies. Or, to put it otherwise: if I'd entrust Ridley Scott to direct the MM series, then Praetorian would be best served by Martin Scorsese.

The story is set two centuries later than Fronto's, and the events in-between have greatly transformed the Roman world. If there would be such a thing as Outstanding Achievement in Historical Description Award, then Simon would be well deserving of one because, while I can't put my finger on what exactly it is that does it, there is a completely different picture of Praetorian's Rome as opposed to MM Rome. I am not versed enough in Roman history, nor traveled enough to know how different high imperial Rome would have been from late republican Rome, but this book teaches a great deal, and I have come to learn Simon's words are mostly to be believed.

It is probably unfair to speak about Praetorian exclusively in comparison terms, but it will be unavoidable, seeing that the writer has been bold enough to approach an era so brilliantly depicted in the multiple Oscar winner The Gladiator, and from an entirely different angle. The main historical characters are the same in the two (Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Lucilla), but in the book they all are everything they are not in the movie. Now, it is a tendency of artistic enterprises to steer the public's opinion towards a simplistic classification of characters or facts in categories. We need a good guy and a bad guy for any sort of drama. So in describing Nero the emperor, for instance, one can either walk the beaten path and consider him a mindless tyrant or go against the current and find some episode or story that would put him in a good light, earning him if not redemption, at least an excuse.

Usually, however, reality is more complicated than what human mind can achieve and classifying historical figures as good or bad is actually detrimental to the science of history. All deeds are contextual, everyone is a man of their time and there is never any telling about any historical figure thought process. We can read Caesar's books, judge his facts and speculate as to his reasons, but it will always be impossible to tell how much he wanted the good of the republic or how heroic the Battle of Alesia was, for instance.

The beauty of fiction, however, is that can fill the gaps in research however the author sees fit. Ridley Scott's Marcus Aurelius is assassinated by his son, while Simon's Commodus is nothing but a loving son and rightful heir. And both can be equally right. Neither Marcus Aurelius, nor Commodus were good or bad, but they were both part of a great game, bigger even than the one Praetorian talks about.

And I was glad to see there is no talk of a decline of the Empire in Praetorian, the obsession of find the high point of Roman history, the one where decline started, being in my opinion an unhealthy one, and one that

has driven historians over two millennia to place this high point anywhere between the Punic Wars and the Odoacer kingship.

Before he gets to the main stage of history, however, we find our hero, Gnaeus Marcius Rustius Rufinus, in the Pannonic forests chasing defeated Marcomanni in a scene that made me think Praetorian might well beat the body count of all the MM series. It doesn't, in the end, as the focus goes quickly away from Legio X Gemina and goes to our young hero and his adventures that - incredulous as they might seem - could just be true. Rufinus will end up a Praetorian Prefect under Caracalla, but until then we'll have to wait a few more years and a few more books. The Great Game only sees the young Rufinus through the last days of Marcus Aurelius - who he gets to meet briefly - and up to the plot against Commodus in 182 AD. It's a way of saying, sees him through, given that he is, more often than not, in the very core of the events, though always in the background and mostly in the stealth. Because our hero is very much an *avant la lettre* James Bond, down to a t, and this book is mostly a book of espionage.

On His Majesty's secret service, young Argentulum gets involved in plots for which the world is not enough. He gets more than a view to a kill, a licence to kill himself and gets to only live twice thanks to Pompeianus' medicus (probably a Dr. No, though not specified) who enables him to die another day and play a further part in the great game of dice royale. The metaphor of the *hasta pura* as a gold finger is brilliant, The *hasta pura* is forever, and Rufinus is the man with the silver gun in the key scene, where he lives and lets die. Oh , I could go on forever, There are even Bond girls - his only quantum of solace, perhaps? - and Senova the Briton can testify as to the Praetorian who loved her. *From Rome with love*, by Simon Turney, who I'd like to see denying the Bond influence on this book.

There are only a couple of other things I can say without giving too much of the plot away: if you liked Connie Nielsen's depiction of Lucilla (I loved it), be prepared for nothing of the same. Commodus' sister is, despite her brief appearances, a central character portrayed mostly in a negative space style. Her presence is always felt, but she is rarely there. Villa Hadriana, the same beautiful arrangement of rocks and gardens it has always been, provides the stage for the story and its rich description put it up second on the list of places I want to see in Rome (first place, Tajan's column, is hard to beat).

In a very Elisabethan turn of events, there's even a dog. Well, two dogs, but... you'll see. And rarely - if ever - have I seen more depth in a non-human character than here. Jungle Books and other personifications don't count.

I'm tempted to say Praetorian is a more accomplished book than Marius' Mules, but when it comes down to the small details, I find that hard to judge. Style always evolves, and the comparison might be unfair to MM, seeing that *The Invasion of Gaul* was Simon's first ever novel. The feeling his, with Praetorian, Simon is running against history much less. There is no detailed first hand account of the facts here like the rigid scaffolding of *De Bello Gallico* is for MM. And he seems to be enjoying this liberty, using each piece of hard information more like a trampoline for new subplots rather than a limitation. There are, of course, big spoilers all over the place (Marcus Aurelius will die, Commodus will become emperor), but they do not seem to be taking away any of the joy of the lecture. If anything, it is the author who gives away too much, like a director too delighted with the footage trying to fit it all in final cut.

A seemingly random scene in the book sees Praetorian Prefect Paternus meeting three senators, Publius Helvius Pertinax amongst them. I knew then we will hear more about this guy, although he does not make another appearance in The Great Game. Which only means there will be more to come. I am looking forward to Praetorian II and mostly, I am looking forward to see Rufinus through the very difficult and delicate year of the five emperors.

People familiar with Simon's works will probably need no convincing to read *The Praetorian*. For the rest, the book will take you down a deep rabbit hole which you'll only wish deeper. And I'm afraid Simon only writes 2-3 books a year, far too little to quench the readers' thirst, although an insanely prolific rate given the quality of the writing.

"If you hope to do any good, the first rule is that you have to survive long enough to do it." Pompeianus' tells Rufinus. Well, young man, you have at least another 35 years.

Dave says

Plot gets a thorough boiling in this entertaining take on the early days of Commodus' reign. Plenty of thrills and blood spills with the occasional profundity.

Kathy says

This was a long one and lacked humor, otherwise it would be a five-star read for me as I do enjoy Roman historical fiction. I have not read this author's other series. There is heavy emphasis on action and the featured hero comes through some deadly encounters with the empire's enemies as well as his fellow Praetorians.

"Marcus Aurelius, emperor of the known world, philosopher, general, genius and father of his people was not at all how Rufinus had expected."

Rufinus gains the emperor's attention and recognition for saving the prefect's life in battle, but with that elevation comes danger as he becomes the target.

His early encounters with the next emperor, Commodus, allowed for a favorable impression. "He was capricious and mischievous, flighty and changeable, but he was also intelligent, witty, thoughtful and, apparently, kind. what an emperor he could make."

Rufinus is given assignment to spy on the sister, Lucilla, who was sent away from Rome where she conspired with others to remove her brother. The drama ensues.

This is the start of a good series, and I will probably pick up with the next. Apparently the Netflix series on Rome features Commodus as well, so I will have to check that out.

John Morris says

A wonderful story

This was a first class tale of intrigue and murder at the heart of Roman society. An environment where it was impossible to tell who could be trusted and who couldn't. The story was both brutal and intriguing, a real page turner. This was probably one of the best ancient Rome stories I have read. Well recommended.

keith lady moore says

Fact finding ly wonderful

A page turner in every chapter shows the reasons for the downfall of the greatest empire of the known world

Jim Galford says

This is an adventurous fiction set in Roman era. The hero is a praetorian in the Roman army. Well written with fairly accurate historical setting and background information.
