



The Imperial Banner

Nick Brown

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The Roman Emperor Aurelian has defeated Queen Zenobia and crushed the Palmyran revolt, but now dark forces threaten a fragile peace, in the sequel to *The Siege*

Faridun's Banner, hallowed battle standard of the Persian Empire, has fallen into Roman hands and is to be returned to the Persians as part of a crucial peace treaty. But on the eve of the signing the banner is stolen. Recalled to Syria, imperial agent Cassius Corbulo is charged with recovering the flag. Accompanied by his faithful servant Simo and ex-gladiator bodyguard Indavara, Cassius must journey across the dangerous Syrian desert to the equally perilous streets of Antioch. He and his companions face ruthless brigands, mysterious cults, merciless assassins, and intrigue at every turn. The hunt is on.

The Imperial Banner Details

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Author : Nick Brown

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Debayan Das says

The gripping story of Cassius continues into this instalment. A new character, a gladiator named Indavara is introduced. The story is set in Antioch and its outlying regions. Cassius and Indavara set off on a quest to find the missing 'Fariduns's Banner'. Corrupt politicians, mysterious cults, Palmyran sympathizers, etc are what Cassius finds himself up against. Nick Brown brilliantly brings out the turmoil during the Crisis of the Third Century with engaging story-telling and thorough background research. A worthy successor to the Agent of Rome. A must read for fans of historical novels.

Rachel says

Loved it. The second in the series, the characters are developing beautifully the plot is great (more lost sleep) and I have moved straight on to the next one. The bits of humour and modern touches slipped in here and there are lovely, and it's also good to see so much actual historical stuff part of it, without being laboured.

Jane says

This series is looking at the protagonist from a different angle. Cassius is not a superhero Roman killing machine. He is a member of the oft-denigrated Secret Service, [i.e., spies, intelligence agents], called derisively *frumentarii*, or 'grain-men'. He has his faults, is often naive and inept; but he is only human, likeable and you root for him. Whenever he's a bit arrogant, I'd like to shake some sense into him!

This is a detective-like story in which he is charged with finding a stolen Persian military banner and some treasure: a scavenger hunt, if you will. Besides the adventure, twists and turns, and red herrings, a place was given to some deductive reasoning. I liked Cassius' efficient servant, Simo, a secret Christian, pleasant and helpful to everyone; his laconic bodyguard, Indavara, the ex-gladiator; and the interplay among all three of them. The dynamic among the trio is a strong point of this series.

According to the author's notes Cassius' bemused toleration of Simo's Christianity was more or less the feeling of upper-class Romans at that time [272 AD]. Most of the horrendous persecutions were in the past except the Great Persecution of Diocletian in the early 4th century which was to come shortly. Constantine's Edict of Milan granting toleration to Christianity was not too far thereafter.

Notwithstanding the running characters, each book in this series strikes me as a stand-alone--the further adventures of Cassius and company. I thoroughly enjoyed this novel and am looking forward to the next one. Mr. Brown certainly did not fall victim to the 'sophomore slump' with this, his second book.

Mary says

When we left Imperial Agent Cassius Corbulo at the end of "The Siege", Book One of the "Agent of Rome"

series, a teenaged Corbulo had survived the brutal attack of a lonely Roman outpost deep in the Syrian desert by forces of the Palmyran Queen Zenobia. The youngster had managed to pull together the undisciplined remnants of the Roman garrison and combined them with an auxiliary detachment of local slingers and a drunken, demoralized Praetorian "hero of Rome" to withstand an onslaught of tribesmen led by the best swordsman in the Palmyrene Empire.

As book two, "The Imperial Banner," opens, we find Corbulo assigned to recover a battle standard of the Persian Empire that fell into Roman hands at the end of the Palmyrene revolt but has since gone missing. The Roman emperor Aurelian plans to return the standard to the Persians as part of a historic peace treaty, so the pressure is on the Imperial Service to find it.

Corbulo is once again accompanied by his faithful Gallic servant, Simo. But his superior, Abascanthius, thinks Corbulo needs more protection on this assignment, since the detail assigned to escort the banner to the emperor was composed of experienced veterans who all vanished as well. So he assigns a body guard named Indavara, a former gladiator, to Corbulo to take care of any rough stuff that should happen along the way.

We learned in Book One that Corbulo, despite his clever intellect and his distant familial lineage from the illustrious General Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, has very marginal sword skills despite the basic military training he received when joining the service. This continues to be a bit disconcerting to me since I am used to most protagonists in this genre being highly skilled warriors. But with at least the presence of a skilled bodyguard Corbulo should be able to survive violent encounters without relying upon an opponents blunder.

The prelude to the book details Indavara's astonishing final performance in Rome's most celebrated arena. The veteran of hundreds of bouts and a crowd favorite, Indavara faces multiple uneven contests in his last bid for freedom because his corrupt lanista has wagered a huge sum against Indavara's survival. This passage was very exciting and really racheted up my expectations for this new character.

As the story unfolds, Corbulo tracks the banner back to Antioch where he tries to determine if the prize has been purloined by a rich merchant or a member of the provincial governor's staff. One of the administrators turns out to be the head of the local Mithras cult so readers get a chance to learn a little about Mithraism along the way.

But as the bodies piled up, I expected to read about more spectacular encounters between Indavara and the villain's minions. However, most of the deaths occur "off stage" so-to-speak, except in the final confrontation. I would have preferred more direct action but maybe I'm just getting blood thirsty in my old age!

Also, although the primary characters were well drawn, there was little backstory or character development for the potential culprits, so Corbulo's eventual triumph lacked the level of gratification it could have had if the reader had a chance to develop an appreciation for the capabilities of Corbulo's opponents. Still, the author did a great job of recreating ancient Antioch and life in the 3rd century CE Roman east and I found it an entertaining read.

Rich Mainville Jr. says

Great story. Even better than the 1st book. the character development, and the way it keeps you guessing until the end makes it such a fun read. It kept my interest from page 1 to 430, without a low point. I look

forward to reading the next.

Iset says

Full disclosure: I received this for free through GoodReads First Reads giveaways.

When I'm browsing through historical fiction, I tend to see a lot of books with a Roman soldier on the cover, stood in a fighting pose. It's become quite a popular trope, and seems to be designed to appeal to the male hist fic reader, just as the headless woman in a gown phenomenon seems designed to appeal to a female hist fic reader. Problem is, you can't tell from these covers, there's such a glut of them, whether the story inside is actually well written or is just ladlit transported to ancient Rome.

I got a couple of alarm bells in the first few pages; the story is very much dominated by the actions and viewpoints of male characters, and our protagonist, Cassius Corbulo (I can't help wondering, incidentally, if he's related to the famous Roman general Corbulo) is an agent of the Imperial Security Service being sent on a top secret mission. Contemporary ladlit, as I'm sure most people have noticed, often features a protagonist in a secret agent role, frequently with military special forces connections. So I was a shade wary at first, especially since the term in English 'Imperial Security Service' just sounded too 20th century to my ears.

However, as I read on it quickly became apparent that this was a different sort of beast. The mystery plot that Corbulo must uncover is convoluted without being incomprehensible, and takes the characters through interesting and varied twists and turns. The writing is clever; clear and lucid whilst at the same time building up a rich world populated by authentic characters. It felt believable. One of the best points about *The Imperial Banner* was that I was clueless until the reveal of who was behind the mystery. Sometimes a book reads far too predictably and I can guess very early on whodunit, and that really sucks a lot of the excitement and energy out of a mystery novel. I'm glad to report that wasn't the case here, and towards the end I even began to suspect someone else entirely, without the novel obviously misdirecting me towards that suspicion. I also can't help but appreciate how the author balances contemporary sensibilities with modern values. Corbulo and the other characters talk out of their times, but not too much, expressing enough doubt or wondering to make them identifiable with the 21st century reader. Pacing is great too, every few pages offering scenes that advance the plot and developments that make you feel like you've progressed, however, as I commented whilst reading, at the same time just slightly frustrating, since we don't learn what's really behind the mystery until fairly late in the book. Frustrating in a page-turner way, although when I was still early in the book and kept seeing how far I still had to go to discover what was going on the frustration wasn't exactly enjoyable.

All in all I would definitely recommend *The Imperial Banner*. It's solidly enjoyable, cleverly written, and I must admit I'm rather intrigued to read the first book and the soon to be released third instalment.

8 out of 10

Paul Bennett says

Cassius Corbulo, a reluctant member of the Imperial Secret Service, the Frumentarii or Grain Men, is back in

this, the second book of Nick Brown's exciting series. In *The Imperial Banner*, Corbulo is tasked with recovering a significant amount of treasure taken from the Palmyrans after their rebellion has failed and is destined to fill Emperor Aurelian's depleted coffers. Among the items stolen is a flag or banner that is very important to the Persians and was to be given to them as a token of peace between Rome and Persia; without it, war is probable. The trail of the perpetrators leads to Antioch and any number of suspects making this one of those stories where surprises abound and where Corbulo's investigative abilities and his endurance are tested to the limits. Aiding him in this task are his manservant, Simo and a wonderful new addition to this series, an ex-gladiator, Indavara. The author has once again hit the mark with this well crafted and satisfying thriller... a page turning, sleep depriving tale of intrigue and greed. 5 stars..

About the author:

Nick Brown grew up in Norfolk and later studied history at the University of Sussex. In 2000 he embarked on a PGCE course at the University of Exeter and began a career as a teacher of English and humanities. Having taught in England and Poland he now lives in his home town, Norwich. 'The Emperor's Silver' is the fifth volume of the 'Agent of Rome' series.

Titles in this series:

The Siege

The Imperial Banner

The Far Shore

The Black Stone

The Emperor's Silver

Lisa says

Welcome to his Imperial Majesty's Secret Service, circa 272.

New to the Imperial secret agent network, Corbulo must track down the whereabouts of a cartload of treasure gone missing, including a certain relic that might make or break an important treaty with the Persians. For a while I was afraid I would agree with certain characters that Corbulo was a spoiled, helpless, and something of a coward. But I read on, and discovered our hero had a core of steel under his soft aristocratic manners. I also enjoyed his sidekicks and the interplay between the characters. I look forward to reading more agent of Rome books. Thanks to the Historical Novel Society for bringing this author to my attention.

Speesh says

The second of Nick Brown's 'Agent of Rome' series, 'The Imperial Banner,' takes place a year or so, if I read it right, after the events of the first book featuring Imperial Roman Agent Cassius Corbulo, 'The Siege.'

At the beginning of this story, we are introduced to a new character, the ex-gladiator, Indavara. Though,

when we first meet him, he's yet to be ex-ed, as it were (and anyway, I always think winning your freedom by getting a wooden sword would have been more than a bit of a let-down, given straight to the kids, surely). As I've already read the fourth book, 'The Black Stone' (Mr Nick was kind enough to send me a copy in return for an honest review, honestly), I do know that Indavara makes it to book four at least, so he's got to be a strong character to stay the distance - in every way. And he is. Silent, strong and, enigmatic. But that's mainly because he's a man of few words. Very few.

So how were Nick Brown's words? Straight from the start I felt like I actually knew the characters, in real life. I cared for/about them, warts and faults alike, like new, old friends, even Simo. Before I knew where I was, I'm three days into can't put it down country. It doesn't follow the 'usual' path for a Roman-period historical novel. It's not a romp, of the typical 'swords and sandals' type. It's more than that. It's more of an investigation into the case of the missing banner, searching for the facts, whether those in charge like them or not. I thought it was more comparable with something from the here and now, like a 'Frost' novel. Not the TV series, the 'darker' books. Little more low-key perhaps than 'The Siege,' where you knew from the start, that the enemy was coming towards the end, so it was all about the build-up to a huge fight. This is all the more interesting for not really having the plot set out from the start. It goes where the investigation leads it. Obviously, the mission is to return the banner, but if it will be, or is, is in doubt all along. For me, it's also interesting to have a Roman series set in the east of the Empire. Not the first, but I seem to have read too few.

Cassius, our 'Agent of Rome,' has been an Imperial Agent a year or more now, and - in Secret Roman Agent-terms - he's still very wet behind the ears. Before he can be The Man from R.O.M.E., of book four. And he can't tell anyone. But he can show them his spear...well, a kind of replica badge of office thing anyway. This gets him all sorts of free passes: access to places a normal citizen wouldn't get access to, fear created at will, discounts off toiletries and free rides on the bus (I'm gonna have to sack that researcher!). Cassius left home and Rome, under something of a cloud. He was sent to the army by his father to be made a man of. So working for The Security Service is not a calling and that gives Nick scope to be objective about not just life as a Roman agent, but life as a Roman in the east, through Cassius' eyes. Cassius has to be resilient, resourceful and sharp to succeed as an agent in the secret service and it seems like he's unknowingly surprising himself along the way, solving the problems that confront him as he goes. The sort that you only see how far you've come, when you look up and look back to where you started from. Cassius' character has developed very satisfactorily from 'The Siege.' "I am now in the employ of the Imperial Security Service and am therefore expected by all and sundry to be a lying, underhand scoundrel. I wouldn't want to disappoint anyone." There is a really gratifying, natural, feel to the progression from the first book, in the filling in of the background of all the characters, the Service, not just the reasoning and motives of Cassius. However, the character development of Cassius alone is worth the admission price. On the downside however, he does have an irritating tendency to fall over at the wrong/inopportune moments.

As hinted at earlier, I felt that, in some ways, it's a brave book - especially for a second novel - in going against (my, anyway) expectations, you know you've read them: Incident ('prologue') some years before main story. Minor bloody battle/skirmish. Reflection, home life, love interest. Huge problem emerges. Preparation for...Huge battle. With optional 'Star Trek' ending. It is one of character and relationship building, within the novel and between the characters, and the reader. 'The Imperial Banner' is totally believable, very exciting and worth an extra star for doing something different with a Roman-type novel.

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adam-p-reviews says

The Imperial Banner is the second book in Nick Brown's The Agent of Rome series and sees us return to the third century and our inexperienced, unlikely hero Cassius Corbulo. After the events in The Siege, Cassius and his manservant Simo have some down time solving some minor crimes which understandably Corbulo enjoys! However, after a long standing conflict between Rome and its greatest rival Persia comes to an end, Corbulo and Simo are called back into action by the Imperial Security Service. As part of the peace treaty between Rome and Persia, a symbolic battle standard known as the Faridun's Banner (or the Derafsh Kaviani) which was captured by the Romans in the war, is agreed to be returned to the Persian Emperor as part of the coming together of the great Empires. The Imperial Security Service is tasked with transporting the standard from Antioch to the peace talks between Rome and Persia. However, when the convoy does not report in several days after its departure, the Service begins to fear the worst and Corbulo is tasked with retrieving the Standard from whomever stole it. Luckily for Corbulo, the Service provides the young officer with a body guard to protect him from the bandits that likely stole the Standard.

Indavara is a sword for hire and is tasked with protecting Corbulo on his investigation. A freed Gladiator, Indavara is an expert in sword fighting and archery, which is lucky for Corbulo because when Indavara first meets him, he is being attacked by three Legionaries! At first Corbulo and the Service expect that the convoy was ambushed by brigands left over from Queen Zenobia's rebellion. However, when clues are unearthed and rumours about Antioch's leading politicians are proved true, Corbulo's belief that the attack on the convoy was an 'inside job' becomes stronger and stronger. Nevertheless, his superiors disagree and are convinced that the Banner was stolen accidentally by opportunistic bandits. With his limited experience, Corbulo is uncertain whether to follow orders or go with his gut instinct, but after a failed assassination attempt on his life, Corbulo is certain that Roman politics and political intrigue is at play and follows his leads to the heart of Antioch's society.

In my review of The Siege I said that I really enjoyed the book because Corbulo was not made out to be a hero, but instead was a scared and inexperienced teenager, which for me made the book more realistic. In The Imperial Banner, Corbulo is still inexperienced teenager but he also becomes a very arrogant and at times, unlikable character. Don't get me wrong, I really enjoyed this factor because again it made the novel and Corbulo seem much more realistic. I could imagine that a rich, aristocratic teenager who has the authority of the Roman Emperor would be arrogant and self-righteous and therefore a little bit unlikable. I don't know if this was intentional but I do really like how Corbulo isn't really the hero that seems to appear in books in this genre. In addition, I found the story behind Faridun's Banner intriguing and thought it was a good mystery for Corbulo to uncover!

All in all, this was a great historical mystery novel in a very promising series and I can't wait to check out the next novel The Far Shore. I would suggest this book to fans of other Roman history novels such as Simon Scarrow's Marco and Cato series or Anthony Riches's Empire series. I'd also suggest it to fans of other historical mystery novels such as C. J. Sansom's Shardelake series.

For more book reviews be sure to check out <http://adam-p-reviews.blogspot.co.uk/>

Tim Goyette says

This series is becoming one of my favorites, The Imperial Banner is a great change of pace from the first

book. There are few books that can continue the story of one character so well while almost completely changing the series genre. This book kept me on the edge of my seat never wanting to put it down. It would have been a 5 star book for me if the last chapter didn't happen. I thought it was corny and a poor way to end such a great book but with that said I can't wait to read more from Nick Brown and continue the story of Cassius.

Edoardo Albert says

Having started with number 6 in the Agent of Rome series I've gone back to the beginning and the first posting for a young and callow Cassius Corbulo. Two thirds of the elements that will make this a great series are already there: Cassius himself and his slave Simo, ever punctilious for his master yet careful to conserve the small dignity afforded to him as a slave in Imperial Rome. What's missing in this first book is the third member of the team, the bodyguard Indavara, who makes his debut in the next novel. However, even without him, this book serves to introduce an unusual, for historical fiction, hero and his even more unusual slave. Cassius is not much good with a sword, relying on his brain rather than muscles, although he does match up with the male wish fulfillment element of historical fiction in that he is unfeasibly handsome and attractive to women. Simo is, potentially, an even more interesting character; I hope Brown will look more deeply into how a slave might attempt dignity when he is, literally, property. The story itself rips along. As soon as I'd finished The Siege I started on The Imperial Banner, the next in the series.

Jarod says

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

Very entertaining book set in the ancient Roman Empire. Part military, part mystery, part thriller as the main characters try to recover an artifact needed to create peace in the eastern part of the empire.

Interesting characters and setting and the historical details were great.

Daniel says

I am really enjoying this series and looking forward to reading the next one. The characters are well developed, and the plot is tight and moves at a good pace.

Bookdragon Sean says

Cassius is more suited to his new mission. Instead of being forced to act as a centurion, as he was in the first novel, he has been tasked with tracking down the imperial banner. This is no ordinary banner; it is a war standard that holds the key to peace between Persia and Rome. Cassius has come a long way since the Siege and has a lot further to go if he wants to find the banner. The author creates a series of clues that keeps the reader engrossed in the story and at the same time has the characters guessing where they could lead.

A new central character has been added to this series, one that opens the book in a **superbly barbaric manor**. Indavara has gained his freedom from slavery by achieving twenty wins in the arena. His final win is a massively glorious feat that showers him in renown. This stubborn ex gladiator is everything Cassius is not: he is physically imposing; a warrior with few equals and is, essentially, innocent to the wider world.

“Those eyes of yours. Cold fury. Mars himself made flesh”

The two characters complement each other rather well in their mission. Cassius has the brains and Indavara the muscle; however, none would be able to function without Cassius's loyal manservant Simo. Simo's compassion gifts him with the moral reasoning, thus he tries to sway the group to take the right action and holds them together at the same time. In this we have the making of an awkward, yet **touching, three-way friendship** that is sure to span the series.

The quest for the banner see's the trio trek half way across the Syrian dessert, following a wayward wagon that leads them on a **trail of bloodshed** ending in Antioch. The city is like all other Roman cities: ripe with intrigue and those that wish to rise above their station. The author has captured the political intrigue of this city remarkable well. Cassius must differentiate between what is mere politics and what could be a possible lead to the banner.

This book is completely different to the first one. I think it shows to things: Cassius's **potential as a character** and the possibilities of where the series could go. He is an Imperial Service Agent and can be dispatched on a mission anywhere. The plot in later books could go to any corner of Rome's Empire and give Cassius chance to develop further. One other important thing to note is that this series can be picked up anywhere in the sequence of novels. I started with the fourth book and have worked my way back from the first one. I've enjoyed reading how the relationships in book four have been formed in these early instalments.

Furthermore, I highly recommend this series to all lovers of mystery-style historical fiction. Though the first book doesn't quite hit that genre, this one definitely does.

Below are links to my reviews of the rest of the series:

Book 1- The Siege

Book 3 - The Far Shore

Book 4- The Black Stone
