

## Dymitr on a personal mission in novel ‘When Among Crows’

By **DONNA EDWARDS**  
The Associated Press

Dymitr is on a personal mission, and it starts with facing the mythical leszy who’s guarding the fern flower as it blooms for the summer solstice.

“When Among Crows,” a novel by Veronica Roth – bestselling author of the “Divergent” series – dives into the world of Slavic mythology. A Chicago native tapping into Polish roots, Roth places nightmarish and intriguing creatures alike in the modern-day city. Whether it’s the woodland leszy, the tragic wraith or the vampire-like strzyga, they’ve each found their place among the mortal humans in the bustle of daily life.

It’s a world where debts create magic, and Dymitr is about to send a lot of scales tipping. Before long, he has a motley crew of unexpected allies.

There’s a Polish saying that opens the book: When

among crows, you must caw as one. As Dymitr faces various trials, moving closer to his ultimate, secret goal, the curtains are parted and we see just how many non-crows are hiding among us in plain sight. Their roles in the world are almost as intriguing as Dymitr’s plotline, and could easily make for their own stories, but the novella keeps its focus. When we finally do find out what he’s after, it means so much more for the bonds he’s forged to get there.

Gruesome yet cavalier, “When Among Crows” has action, romance, family drama, fantasy, and a healthy helping of mythology. Best devoured in one or two sittings, the story is tight, the lore inviting and the characters fun. Roth knows how to cleanly fit an arc in under 200 pages without feeling rushed. It’s the perfect length for the story, precisely because it leaves you wanting more.

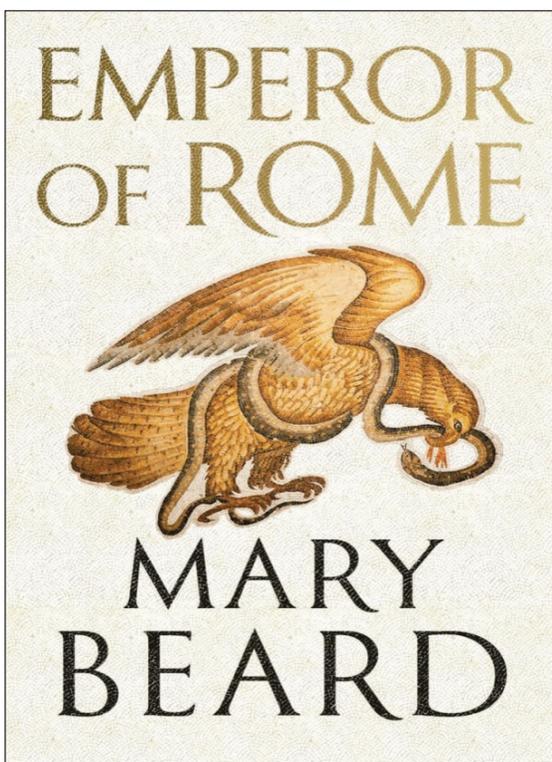
# ‘Emperor of Rome’ offers a wealth of knowledge

“Emperor of Rome,” by Mary Beard. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2023. 493 pages, \$39.99 (hardback).

Mary Beard has been a Professor of Classics at Cambridge University, a blogger, a television personality, and author of SPQR, Confronting the Classics, and Women & Power. Whereas SPQR focused more on the sweep of Roman history over a period of more than a thousand years from monarchy to Republic to Empire, this book concentrates on the early centuries of imperial one-man rule from the mid-first century BCE through the mid-third century CE and considers activities of about 30 individual emperors.

The author sees this period as more stable and better suited to understanding what an emperor’s life was like and how he was perceived by the Roman people. She makes it very clear that she has come to detest autocracy as a political system, but has also become more sympathetic to those caught up in it from the very bottom to the top. She intends to “track the emperor down ... from the imperial dinner table to the military frontiers, from his doctors’ reports to his appearance in jokes, satires and dreams, from his office desk to his last words.”

After a Prologue featuring the bizarre jokes played by the emperor Elagabalus on the guests at his dinner party, Beard organizes her book into ten chapters that examine various perspectives on Roman emperors: “One-Man Rule: The Basics;” “Power Dining: Who’s Next?” “The Art of Succession; What’s in a Palace?” “Palace People: The Emperor in his Court;” “On the Job; Time Off?” “Emperors Abroad; Face to Face” and “I Think I am Becoming a God.” In each chapter, the author cites a



variety of sources to explore what is known about how different emperors handled their office in each aspect of the job. She often points out that what sources say may have been made up after an emperor has died, for example, to build up a successor by denigrating his predecessor.

In the “Power Dining” chapter, the author expresses skepticism about some of the complex concoctions described in the sources: “What kind of meals could diners easily eat, with just one hand, while half-lying down, and without the benefit of a modern fork – even with practice?” In the chapter on succession, Beard points out that after the civil war ended the Julio-Claudian dynasty with Nero’s suicide in 68 CE, Vespasian “was even credited with performing miracles in almost biblical style. In Egypt, on his way to Rome to take up the throne, he is said to have

restored sight to a blind man with his spit, and to have made a lame man walk with his touch. It was one way of compensating for a lack of imperial connections.” Vespasian, of course, did not want to establish ties to the unpopular Nero. His portrait images are very distinct, and Beard says his expression “made it look as if he was straining to relieve himself.” He also used funds acquired from his putting down the Jewish rebellion to start construction of the Flavian Amphitheatre on the site of Nero’s Lake, near that emperor’s Golden House. This popular event structure later acquired the name of the Colosseum from Nero’s colossal statue nearby.

In the “What’s in a Palace?” chapter, Beard describes Hadrian’s marvelous palace outside Rome at Tivoli, which artists and others have visited from the Renaissance on to explore for its “genuine

undisturbed remains of the Roman world.” The author says that archaeologists have unearthed interesting details here of the management of the emperor’s housing and home life. Included in these discoveries are the imperial gardeners’ recycling of old containers of wine and oil to use as planting pots and a three-mile network of underground tunnels that presumably allowed slaves to circulate around the area out of sight of residents, but also could have stored visitors’ carriages.

The book is illustrated with numerous black and white images throughout and with a striking section of color photographs. There are also several maps, a timeline, imperial family charts, a list of illustrations, an index and a marvelous section on Further Reading and Places to Visit.

My only suggestions would be to add reference to Hadrian’s series of travel coins to Beard’s detailed discussion of that emperor’s tour of imperial provinces and to include mention of those emperors who celebrated the spectacular Saecular Games, a custom that was intended to be held only every 100 or 110 years, but with some exceptions.

Overall, the book includes a wealth of information used to compare and contrast various emperors on their portrait busts, their triumphs, their style of governing, their military activity, their funerals and monuments, and their interactions with the hoi polloi. From all of this emerges a sense of what it was like to be a Roman emperor and I recommend the book highly.

– Reviewed by Richard Weigel, WKU History Department

## A grandfather’s 1,500-page family history sustains Messud’s latest

By **ANN LEVIN**  
The Associated Press

Secrets and shame – every family has its share. When it came time to write her most autobiographical novel, Claire Messud relied on a 1,500-page family history compiled by her paternal grandfather. The result, “This Strange Eventful History,” sprawls over a third as many pages – 423, to be exact – to tell the story of three generations of a French Algerian family displaced from their colonial homeland, who never quite found another place where they felt so completely at home.

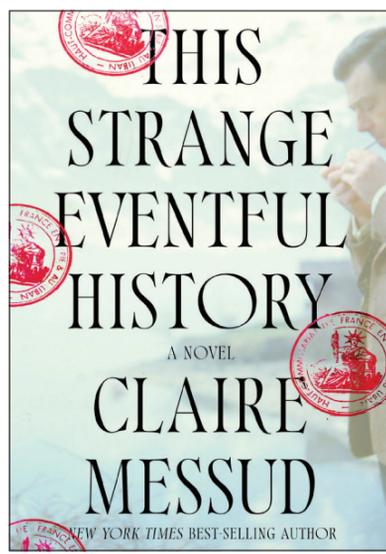
The story is told from the point of view of the fiercely French, devoutly Catholic,

patriarch Gaston; his rootless, cosmopolitan son, Francois; and his fearful, deluded, psychologically damaged daughter, Denise. Rounding out the chorus are Barbara, the beautiful, Protestant, Canadian-born wife of Francois, torn between roles as wife, mother and daughter as she struggles to earn a law degree at the peak of 1970s-era “women’s lib” while raising their two daughters and whipping up Julia Child recipes for dinner parties; and finally, Gaston’s granddaughter Chloe, a stand-in for the author, inheritor of this “strange, eventful history” and ultimately, spillover of family secrets and perhaps, exorciser of shame.

Behind the “endless ritual”

of their busy lives – from birth to death, grade school to retirement – Messud is keenly aware that a vaster story is unfolding, one that spans epochs and continents, perceived only in glimmers by various members of the clan. For instance, when Francois calls Barbara to tell her about a terrible accident at the site of a mining operation in Australia, where they have been posted for his job, she thinks, “What had been there? Not nothing. It was an Aboriginal tribal homeland; before it had been transformed into a dystopian hellscape, it had been untouched for thousands of years, the people there living as lightly and resourcefully upon the land as the animals and birds.”

For fans of Messud, whose earlier novels include the bestselling 2006 novel “The Emperor’s Children” as well as “The Woman Upstairs,” this latest work will be ambrosial, brimming with long passages that attempt to capture the evanescent sensations of life – touch, taste, sounds, smells, the ever-shifting register of light. Others may get lost in dense, descriptive passages that roll on and on, owing a debt to the English modernist writer Virginia Woolf, one of Messud’s literary heroes. Yet all in all, the book is a masterful achievement, a somber, joyous meditation on the consolations and disappointments of empire, nation, faith and family.



## Anonymous servants the heart of ‘Situation Room’

(AP) — The biggest challenge for an author tackling the history of the Situation Room, the basement room of the White House where some of the biggest intelligence crises have been handled in recent decades, is the room itself. As a setting, it’s pretty underwhelming.

In “The Situation Room: The Inside Story of Presidents in Crisis,” George Stephanopoulos describes how the room – actually a series of rooms – for much of its history didn’t live up

to its reputation in popular imagination or media. The centerpiece of it, as Stephanopoulos writes, had “all the charm of a cardboard box.”

But what keeps readers engaged in Stephanopoulos’ history isn’t any behind the scenes schematics or technology. This isn’t a Tom Clancy novel, though it moves along as briskly as one. Instead, it’s the stories Stephanopoulos and Lisa Dickey share of the normally nameless and faceless public servants, the duty offi-

cers who have staffed the center since its inception during John F. Kennedy’s presidency.

Stephanopoulos, a political commentator and ABC anchor who worked in the Clinton White House, wisely zeroes in on a single crisis during each of 12 presidencies during the Situation Room’s history. Along the way, he reveals much about the differing management styles of the nation’s presidents and offers plenty of interesting pieces of history.

## BARNES & NOBLE BEST-SELLERS

1. “Why I Cook” by Tom Colicchio
2. “The Official Stardew Valley Cookbook” by ConcernedApe, Ryan Novak
3. “Leather & Lark” by Brynne Weaver
4. “Onyx Storm” by Rebecca Yarros
5. “Mind Games: A Novel” by Nora Roberts
6. “Home Is Where the Bodies Are” by Jeneva Rose
7. “The Dixon Rule” by Elle Kennedy
8. “Reckless” by Lauren Roberts
9. “Think Twice” by Harlan Coben
10. “The Women: A Novel” by Kristin Hannah
11. “Two Twisted Crowns” by Rachel Gillig
12. “One Dark Window” by Rachel Gillig
13. “Camino Ghosts: A Novel” by John Grisham
14. “The Situation Room: The Inside Story of Presidents in Crisis” by George Stephanopoulos
15. “Bits and Pieces: My Mother, My Brother, and Me” by Whoopi Goldberg
16. “Long Island” by Colm Tóibín
17. “Funny Story” by Emily Henry
18. “Rebel Girl: My Life as a Feminist Punk” by Kathleen Hanna
19. “The 24th Hour” by James Patterson, Maxine Paetro
20. “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” by Dr. Seuss

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