



SPQR I: The King's Gambit

John Maddox Roberts

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In this Edgar Award nominated mystery, John Maddox Roberts takes readers back to a Rome filled with violence and evil. Vicious gangs ruled the streets of Crassus and Pompey, routinely preying on plebeian and patrician alike. So the garroting of a lowly ex-slave and the disembowelment of a foreign merchant in the dangerous Subura district seemed of little consequence to the Roman hierarchy. But Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger, high-born commander of the local vigiles, was determined to investigate. Despite official apathy, brazen bribes and sinister threats, Decius uncovers a world of corruption at the highest levels of his government that threatens to destroy him and the government he serves. Set in 70 B.C.

SPQR I: The King's Gambit Details

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Author : John Maddox Roberts

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From Reader Review SPQR I: The King's Gambit for online ebook

Jakub Spilka says

Poutavý p?řb?h a zápletka v živém starém ?ím?. Baví, u?í a vysv?tluje.

Shawn Thrasher says

I first read The King's Gambit many years ago (so long ago I couldn't remember whodunnit); I enjoy listening to audio versions of books I have enjoyed in the past. I loved this series; the audio version was just extra chocolate chips in the cookie. The King's Gambit is a bit noir-ish; there is first person detective Decius (in this case reminiscing about the past), a femme fatale (actually two), lots of tough talking thugs, at least three murders, and a piece of jewelry (a "Roman falcon") on which the plot hinges. I say "noir-ish" because this book also has a lightness and wit about it that's missing in the heaviest of noir fiction. Decius has a sense humor about the whole thing that shines through and makes him a delightful character (this humor is played out even more in later books). For a compare and contrast of two excellent series set in the same time period, try some Steven Saylor. Simon Vance is a superb narrator; he also narrated a kick ass version of Bring Up the Bodies.

Jim Fonseca says

(A revision of an earlier review)

A great novel rich in historical detail about Rome, especially the complexities of politics and how people rose to power. We also learn a lot about daily life in Rome: meals, customs, slavery.

We also learn a lot about crime and street thugs in ancient Rome. Many people are murdered at this time in Rome, but it only matters to the authorities if it is someone of social significance. It wasn't always safe to go out in the streets at night despite the supposedly tight control of the city by the Roman legions.

And we have a murder mystery. This is the first in a series of SPQR books by Roberts. But a good companion book to this one by another author is Pompeii: A Novel by Robert Harris which focuses more on Roman architecture and hydraulic engineering (aqueducts).

top image by Amelie Veaux on redditmedia.com
lower image from alamy.com - ERGTNX

Dana Stabenow says

You must understand, whoever you are, that in those days Rome, mistress of half the world, was a place as savage as a village of Nile pygmies.

Thus providing employment for our narrator, one Decius Caecilius Metellus, young commander of what passes for local law enforcement in his district of the city of the seven hills, circa 70BC. As John Maddox Roberts' *The King's Gambit* begins, someone is committing arson and garroting manumitted gladiators and rich freedmen in Rome. In a plot that moves from simple murder to outright treason and threatens his own life, Decius' investigation takes him into a Senator's sister's bed, to a brushing acquaintance with pirates (those same pirates who betrayed Spartacus, and here we find out why) all the way up to the Senate, including its two Consuls, Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus.

Yes, *that* Crassus and *that* Pompey. One of the most enjoyable things about this series (which now numbers thirteen) is the cameo appearances by characters right out of the history books, like Gaius Julius Caesar (yes, *that* Caesar), as in

The new calendar was one of Caesar's better ideas. (At least, he called it his calendar. It was Cleopatra's court astronomer, Sosigenes, who actually created it, and in truth it was Caesar's own neglect of his duties when he was Pontifex Maximus that got the old calendar into such dreadful shape in the first place. That's something you won't find in the histories written later by his lackeys.)

Ouch. But Decius gives the devil his due, too, as here

Hortalus gave very florid speeches, in what was known as the Asiatic style. He wrote the same way...Such writing reads very strangely now, since Caesar's bald and unornamented yet elegant style revolutionized Latin prose. Between them, Caesar's books and Cicero's speeches utterly changed the language as it was taught in my youth.

The period detail is great, too, as when Decius goes to Ostia to interview a witness

From each shop front and storehouse came the fragrances of the whole Mediterranean world. Incense and spices were stored here, and rare, fragrant woods. The odors of fresh-sawn cedar from the Levant and pulverized pepper from even farther east mingled with those of frankincense from Egypt and oranges from Spain. It smelled like Empire.

Decius is an engaging character, not the ambitious social climber you'd expect from a young Roman on his way up, but a good man whose motivation to solve these crimes, as he confesses to his vestal virgin aunt, comes from not wanting to see innocent slaves crucified in lieu of the actual murderer.

Yet another true detail of soon to be imperial Rome that will make you glad you're enjoying this story in a comfortable chair in your living room two thousand years later, and not living through it yourself.

Joyce says

Good mystery, well-narrated. Not certain why Blackstone has re-recorded with John Lee; although I haven't

listened to Simon Vance's recording, I imagine it's as good as Lee's fine version. Moves at a fairly leisurely pace, as it's filled with interesting historical details; first in series sets up characters, including real historical personages; complex mystery; polished style; rather dark tone.

Nikki says

First in a series set in ancient Rome, which I think I'll continue reading as time permits. It's the sort of historical mystery from which one learns, fairly effortlessly, quite a bit about the time and place where it's set. I fear that most of what I know of ancient Rome comes from reading Edith Hamilton 50+ years ago, at least until this year when I listened to both Roberts' book and Thomas Harris' Imperium. The King's Gambit was a good mystery with an engaging protagonist. Recommended.

Jamie Collins says

This reads like a dry history lesson compared to the richness of Steven Saylor's *Roma Sub Rosa* series. There's way too much exposition, with a convenient foreigner present who needs Rome's customs and traditions explained to him. I could see potential in the main character, though, so I'll try the second book to see if there is an improvement in the prose.

Mr. Matt says

Three stars bordering on three and a half. The book follows Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger, a minor civic official in ancient (pre-Imperial) Rome charged with investigating crimes. In this book he stumbles across a very deep conspiracy that seeks to undermine a Roman general in the field.

The book does a great job at placing the reader in a living, breathing city. It really immerses you. It was a nice diversion from the traditional "military" historical fiction that I've been reading - stories focusing on armies and generals and soldiers.

So why only three stars? On reading I had a hard time keeping the plot straight. Or rather, details were coming at me but I was having a hard time holding all the pieces together. That wouldn't be terrible if I had a slew of suspects, but I felt the plot was too strongly foreshadowed. I knew who the culprits were. I just didn't know why I knew. In a mystery I like to have more unknowns and more suspects.

I will say that I DID like the ending. The author could've given his readers a clean, pat ending. Instead, the story ends with a less satisfying ending for Metellus and, frankly, a probably much more realistic ending. I liked that. That's why I think it's three stars bordering on three and a half.

Kathy Davie says

First in the SPQR historical mystery series revolving around Decius Caecilius Metellus and his interest in snooping, LOL.

My Take

Roberts is using a first-person narration, and it's odd to hear him tell us what's happening now AND of various characters' futures at the same time. Useful, but odd. It does, however, contribute to my feeling of being hit over the head. As though I'm not bright enough to pick up on the clues.

That bit when Roberts introduces the forensics aspect of it with Asklepiodes and his wounds study helped that feeling along. Definitely an eye-rolling moment. The overt patriotism Decius proclaims is very admirable, but it has a juvenile feel to it. It doesn't help that Decius stumbles over so many clues that should have had him questioning events and people much earlier in the story.

Roberts does spend a lot of time informing us of the history of wars and Roman politics; I'm assuming it's to ensure we have a background against which we can follow along with the clues. I just wish it didn't feel quite so much as if he were *telling* us. Decius' consultation with Cicero, however, was very well done in providing us with background information but disguised as advice.

Like Steven Saylor in *Roman Blood*, Roberts also relays Roman customs of daily and religious life. There's more of an emphasis in this one on the military service required of Roman men, and a tremendous importance on putting on the toga when paying calls or anytime you want to impress people. I'm also grateful for our current religious practices---I'd hate to be so beholden to omens and portents!

There's a very useful explanation of the difference between plebeians and patricians. Hmm, Roberts has made me curious about Spartacus. All I know is *about* the movie and that he had been a slave. Now I want to know more.

"I'm learning street-level politics from Macro."

"And you're learning Senate-level politics from me," I said.

"You're right. And so far, it looks just like the street."

It's been an interesting blend of books I've been reading lately, and it's set me to thinking about life before radio, television, and the Internet. When people had to entertain themselves. They learned to play instruments, memorize poems and plays, hold dances, perform in theatricals. As much as I love my TV and Internet, I do wish we had a bit more of the community involvement. Yes, and then my second thought, but don't make me participate. Oh, brother, I'm such a hypocrite!

It's obvious from the start that Decius isn't expected to do more than sign off on the investigation. It's also obvious that he's a conservative thinker.

LOL, I did like how Sergius Paulus got around the matter of the disbursement of his estate and slaves!

I'm having a hard time warming up to this. I like the characters---they're certainly colorful!---but there's a feeling of detachment, a coldness to this. And I find I'm getting confused between Saylor's *Roma Sub Rosa* and Roberts' *SPQR*. I like Saylor's tale more---it's warmer and pulls me in with the characters as opposed to viewing them---and I'll likely read Saylor's series first.

The Story

A fire at Paramedes' warehouse and a series of murders creates a stir of interest around Metellus the Younger. And it soon becomes obvious that he's expected to stamp this case closed.

The Characters

Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger is serving as a commissioner for the Commission of Twenty-six and has discovered he has a flair for snooping. **Burrus** is an old soldier and part of Decius' required entourage. **Cato** is one of his slaves, the janitor or doorkeeper.

Decius Caecilius Metellus the Elder, a.k.a., Cut-Nose, served under General Marius and is now an Urban Praetor; he'll stand for Consul in two years. The **Caecilii Metelli** are a plebeian nobility with the only real negative that they are not qualified for certain priesthoods---young Decius sees this as a plus. **Aunt Caecilia**, the Vestal, was now the *Virgo Maxima*, the head of the college and of the Temple of the Vestals. The Metellis' patron is **Quintus Hortensius Hortalus** (his character also appears in Steven Saylor's Roma Sub Rosa series).

Publius Claudis Pulcher is a young hothead and planning to change his patrician status and become a Clodius instead. **Claudia** is his much brighter sister with plans of her own. **Chrysis** is her maid. **Prince Tigranes** of Armenia is on the run from his father, **King Tigranes the Elder**.

Caius Julius Caesar seems to have shed his propensity for debauchery and debt to pursue a career in politics. On the side of the Populares, no less! He's currently married to **Cornelia**, a daughter of Cinna. [Decius says that he is "the most brilliantly cold-blooded schemer".] General Marcus Licinius **Crassus** is one of the richest and a Consul of Rome along with **Pompey**. And Roberts repeats the "rumors" of Crassus' habit of being the first at a fire.

Sergius Paulus is a freedman, but one of the richest men in Rome. **Pepi** is the slave who sleeps across his bedroom door. **Marcus Ager** was another freeman who used to fight under the name of Sinistrus. **Paramedes** is an Asian Greek from Antioch, and the pirates' representative in Rome. **Zabbai** is a silk merchant. **Hasdrubal** sells cloth in Ostia.

Macro is a gang boss with political connections, including being a client of Hortensius. Titus Annius **Milo** is a former rower who now works for Macro. *I suspect he'll be a regular in the cast. A good thing, if so, as I do like him.*

General Lucius Licinius Lucullus is battling **Mithridates**, Rome's most current enemy, and is under fire in Rome. **Tribune Gnaeus Quintilius Carbo** brings news of the war and Decius gives him warning.

Lucius Satilius runs the gladiator school, Ludus Satilius. **Asklepiodes** is the physician who has done a study of wounds.

The cautious **Rutilius** is Commissioner for the Trans-Tiber district; **Optimius** is Commissioner in charge of the Aventine, Palatine, and Caelian districts. **Junius** is the Senate freedman who acts as secretary. **Quintus Curius** is an "extraordinarily dissipated young Senator. **Cicero** is here as is **Tiro**, his secretary slave. **Lucius Sergius Catilina**.

The **Forum** had been a mass of temples, market stalls, fortune teller's booths, speakers' platforms, a place for men to idle, etc.

The Cover

The cover is gorgeous with a man's surprised face done in a Roman-style mosaic, blood pooling along his jawline and banded top and bottom with marble.

The title is a chess move and I'm not sure if it's Roberts' play on *King's Gambit* being the first in a series or if it refers to Decius' move within this story.

Ken says

The following is about the series as a whole, to most of which I give 5 stars. I actually liked the later ones better than this one, the first, which was certainly good.

I'm an amateur Latinist with scholarly training, and have long had a particular interest in the late Roman Republic, the period of this series. I'm astonished at how well Roberts gets into the minds of the Romans, into the details of their lives, into events and the politics and other factors behind those events. I find them much more true-to-life than the other Roman series (Saylor, Davis, which I nonetheless liked). This is the real Rome, not Hollywood Rome, or the Rome of second-rate teachers and innumerable hack historians. As far as large-scale events, their causes, and implications are concerned, you can just about read these books as history. Where the history is subject to interpretation, Roberts is among the most perceptive interpreters. In fact, never mind the "just about". Many historians have been less adequate and less and balanced.

Even the historical characters seem astonishingly real, and true to history and to the personae they have left in literature. Roberts makes even the shadowy Pompey into a lifelike character as has no other historian I've read (I haven't read Gelzer on P.), a character who would have done exactly what the historical Pompey did.

One notable exception (and virtually the only significant departure from known fact that I've detected) is the character of Milo. Roberts' Milo is plausible enough. He's a bit larger than life, but this was a setting (like Elizabethan England and the early American West) that generated many people who actually were larger than life normally gets. The real Milo did what Roberts' Milo did in this series, as far as the historical record shows. But I've never seen any indication that Milo was ever a free rower, or that his origins were in the street. The historical Milo was from the local nobility of a town outside of Rome, though he was certainly a gang-leader and political agitator in Rome, and nothing much else. If I recall correctly, in later books, Roberts reconciles Milo's background with the historical record as far as possible without deviating from the account given in the earlier books. I would guess that Roberts' Milo makes for much better fiction than the real one would have, and again, this is the only departure from history that I've detected, and one which does not entail any other departures.

The historical accuracy comes with no tradeoff in entertainment value, however. Roberts is a fiction writer first and foremost. Characterization, color, action, plot, and puzzle all make for a first-rate read.

Georgina Ortiz says

I read this book while taking a break from Steven Saylor's Roma Sub Rosa series. Because I only had two Roma Sub Rosa books left to read, I was scouting for another series set in Ancient Rome (can't get enough of this genre). I saw Roberts' SPQR while surfing the Net, bought the first book in the series, and read it after finishing Saylor's A Mist of Prophecies.

I wasn't disappointed.

While the Roma Sub Rosa series can be described as fast-paced (I practically gobbled up every exhilarating book in the series), SPQR allowed you to savor every page--morsel by *interesting, well-written* morsel. I want to compare Roma Sub Rosa's Gordianus with SPQR's Decius, but this is supposed to be a "review" of The King's Gambit. Besides, that would be unfair because they are both wonderful protagonists.

I loved the book; it painted Ancient Rome vividly and wonderfully. Many of the characters that I encountered in Saylor's books, such as Caesar, Pompey, and the Clodians, I also encountered here (Roma Sub Rosa and SPQR were both set in the late Roman Republic). It was interesting to take a look at them from another author's perspective (e.g. Titus Annius Milo here was far more likable than in Roma Sub Rosa).

I kinda panicked while reading the last few pages of the book because I thought it was going to wrap up "flatly," but there was a touching surprise at the end. All I can say is, SPQR lessens the pain of having to end Roma Sub Rosa :)

Netanella says

If you're a history buff and love all things late Roman Republic, this is a most excellent read, as Bill or Ted might describe it. As a whodunit mystery novel chock full of murder most foul, intrigue, a few double crossings, a dab of licentious sex, and peopled by corrupt politicians, street brawlers, early CSI Greek physicians, and even a contortionist, this book is sure to delight.

Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger is of the plebian nobility, which means he's an up-and-comer in the late Republic. With stout heart, a strong sense of Roman duty, and a family name, Decius works in public office as a commander of the vigiles in his district of Suburia. In other words, he's the sheriff of his district, looking out against crime in all shapes and sizes: fire, theft, assault, murder. In investigating a series of murders in his district, Decius gets unwittingly caught up in the machinations of the consuls Pompey and Crassus and two foreign kings, of Pontus and Armenia.

The setting of ancient Rome is a fun one, and made more so if the reader already has knowledge of the characteristics of the time period. And, even if the reader is a newbie to the world of ancient Rome, the book is an easy read, the characters are relatable, and the plot a decent one. Recommended.

Jeffrey says

Take John Sanford's Virgil Flowers or Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch, drop the guy into the last years of the ancient Roman Republic, add a physician that is a proto-forensic scientist, throw in a couple of underworld figures, and you get *The King's Gambit*. It was a fun read, and the broad strokes of history are accurate enough.

Estelle says

Maybe I wasn't in the right mood, or maybe it just wasn't very good... I don't know. I just didn't care much

for it.

I'll stick to Marcus Didius Falco, he's a much more entertaining protagonist.

Susan says

The King's Gambit by John Maddox Roberts Set in the 1st century ancient Rome, this murder mystery will have you hooked and wanting more. In the time of Crassus and Pompey, murder and intrigue are not that uncommon. However, there is the dual murders of an ex-slave and a foreign merchant that catch the eye of Decius Caecilius Metellus. He isn't willing to write these deaths off so quickly.

When I was younger, I read several of these SPQR books in paperback. I just couldn't get enough of them. I was very delighted to find them in audio and narrated by one of my favorite narrators, Simon Vance. This book is a great introduction to the series and our main hero and detective Decius. I really enjoy how the murder trail cuts through several levels of society. This book doesn't focus on the rich and famous, but rather, makes them the backdrop to the rest of Roman society.

There is a bit of sex in this book. Or rather, there is plenty of sensuality that leads up to the sex, which is then mostly done behind a curtain. The lead up was very well done. There were drugs and alcohol and tumblers involved, so it was all a little fuzzy to Decius the next morning. Coinciding with that, I wish there were a few more female characters in the story. But that is my only quibble with this book.

The author does a great job of putting the reader in ancient Rome. The food and the clothes and the lack of modern plumbing are all there for the reader experience. Plus the author does a great job of showing societal norms of the time, which is important in understanding the mindset of the main characters. He doesn't try to take modern morals and shove them into an ancient Roman character.

The Narration: Simon Vance was awesome as always. He had distinct voices for both males and females. He didn't hesitate at all with the Latin phrases tossed in here and there.
