

Q. Your first book, *An Exemplary Man*, is about the landscape of masculinity in the first century Roman world, and how that landscape is reshaped in the character of Cornelius. Did that research help you write *Frontier Man*?

A. Absolutely. The historical sources that feed the New Testament—both literary and material—feed the narrative and plot of the novel. I incorporated language from inscriptions about benefaction for the (long) speech made by the character Bracteus. Elite Roman expectations about masculinity undergird his appearance, his behavior, even his contempt for people who do not meet those standards. But elite Roman masculinity was a moving target, hard to hit even for those fully invested in it, and many acts of rebellion likely went unnoticed. For example, the character Virgos trips and disrupts the performance of generosity that Bracteus had designed. The reader later discovers that the fall was intentional.

Q. This is your first work of fiction. What led you to try writing a novel?

A. In college I read Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*, and I was fascinated by the potential of what she called "historical imagination." Fiction set in the first century CE can be historically precise, theologically responsible, and yet innovative. I used the tools of exegesis to build a story that, as a result, can be exegeted. The creativity of that process was exhilarating, especially the dreams that Batos has. They have apocalyptic and eschatological dimensions to them, and I had the freedom to unleash a variety of allusions and echoes.

Q. The novel highlights the role of theater as a means of spreading the news of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as a means to critique the worship of emperors as divine. Why do you suggest that theater might have been an important tool for the early Christians?

A. As David Rhoads and others have pointed out, many people in the first century Roman Mediterranean did not read. Literacy was limited to the elite, and performances allowed people to participate in a way that written texts did not. In addition to that, I wanted to show the process of creating performances and the possibility for resistance that theater entails. The plays in this book are *in process*; they are either being written or they are evolving, performance by performance, to speak to people in different settings. The movement is gaining momentum, sharpening its edge, and reaching out to those who might not have had access any other way.

Q. The character of Virgos—known as "Eunuch"—is an intersex person who finds comfort in a new scroll from Alexandria. How did those two ideas come together?

A. The new scroll in the story is a direct nod to the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. Some scholars suggest that the Wisdom of Solomon was written by Greek-speaking

Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, during the reign of the Roman emperor Caligula (37-41 CE), which would have made it available to the characters in this story. As Virgos describes, he held on to the message of Isaiah because it included him in the covenant of the Lord (Isaiah 56:4). The good news that he was not just a dry tree (Isaiah 56:3) challenged the texts that he had heard as a child, where people with anatomical variants were excluded (Leviticus 21:17-23; Deut. 23:1). When he reads the new scroll, he rejoices, because in this text, faithfulness is valued above all and he “will be given a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord” (Wisdom of Solomon 3:14). He longs to visit the temple in Jerusalem, but at the end of the story, he doesn’t get there. At least not yet.

Q. The natural world plays a bigger role in your second book than in your first one. Tell us more about that. What was your motivation for it?

A. I grew up on a farm in rural Illinois, always in connection and conversation with the earth. I wanted to incorporate that lens to a greater degree. But biblical texts themselves lead us to consider how plants and animals express themselves in movement, speech, and song. The Psalms, the Prophets, Revelation...in many ways the earth and all its inhabitants hope for blessing and liberation. In the case of *Frontier Man*, the plant hellebore reveals its dangerous potential. A kingfisher and a pine marten are omens. Like a prophet, the character Batos is a keen observer of the world around him.

Q. Your Instagram username is “undertheromanroad.” Can you tell us how that relates to the book?

A. On Instagram I post images of art and antiquities related to the book – a Roman coin with a kneeling Parthian on it, for example. The username refers to a specific dream in Chapter 20 and a general approach to “what came before.” To write the back story of the character Batos, I studied Roman expansion into what is now Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Classics, geology, anthropology, archaeology...I was hooked. Three things happened: I read about the possibility of a giant water aquifer under the desert, remembered Revelation 12 when the earth opened up, and then imagined how the desert might open up to swallow Roman roads and colonies. The first known Roman road in that area was completed in 14 CE by Legio III Augusta, and it cut through the grazing lands of indigenous tribes. The Roman presence and colonization there led to armed rebellions that still interest me.

Q. Will there be a sequel?

A. It’s possible! I don’t know each character fully yet, but I’m certain that they have more to say. I look forward to seeing where they can go. In the words of Virgos, “there is room.”