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Rome Burns and an Emperor is Blamed - An Editorial Review of "Forgiving Nero" by Mary Ann

Bernal

GUEST POST



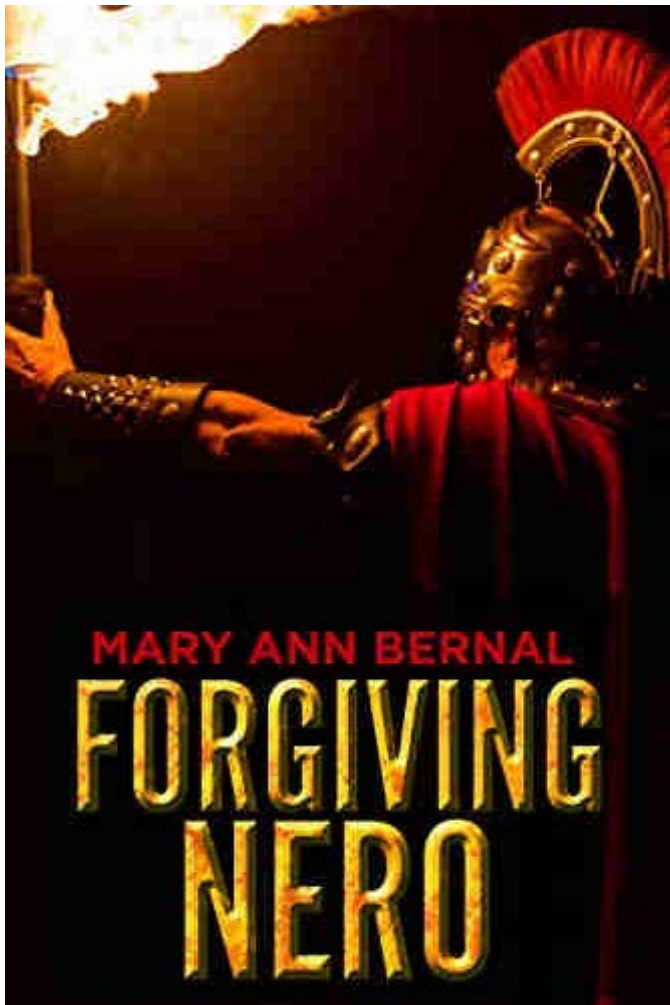
Author Bio:

Mary Ann Bernal attended Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY, where she received a degree in Business Administration. Her literary aspirations were ultimately realized when the first book of The Briton and the Dane novels was published in 2009. In addition to writing historical fiction, Mary Ann has also authored a collection of contemporary short stories in the Scribbler Tales series and a science fiction/fantasy novel entitled Planetary Wars Rise of an Empire. Her recent work includes Crusader's Path, a redemption story set against the backdrop of the First Crusade, and Forgiveing Nero,

a novel of Ancient Rome.

Since Operation Desert Storm, Mary Ann has been a passionate supporter of the United States military, having been involved with letter-writing campaigns and other support programs. She appeared on The Morning Blend television show hosted by KMTV, the CBS television affiliate in Omaha, and was interviewed by the Omaha World-Herald for her volunteer work. She has been a featured author on various reader blogs and promotional sites.

Mary Ann currently resides in Elkhorn, Nebraska.



Book Blurp:

Rome. The jewel of the civilized world is no longer what it was. Strength has failed the Senate. Her legions are in disarray, and the Empire has fallen into Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus Nero's hands. His reign begins under a cloud of scrutiny, for he is the depraved Emperor Caligula's nephew. Nero is determined to overcome that stigma and carve a name of his own. One worthy of Rome's illustrious history.

Politics and treachery threaten to end Nero's reign before it begins, forcing him to turn to unexpected sources for friendship and help. Many of the Praetorian Guard have watched over Nero since he was a small child, and it is in Traian that the young Emperor places his trust, despite the inherent threat of reducing his mother's influence. Traian is the father he never had and the one man who does not judge him.

When Traian secretly marries the hostage Vena, it sets in motion a collision of values as Traian comes to odds with his former charge. The whirlwind that follows will shake the very foundations of the greatest Empire the world has ever known, and survival is far from guaranteed.

Book Buy Link: <https://amzn.to/3KFWp5J>

Editorial Review:

The Emperor Nero, the fifth and last of the line of the Julio-Claudian dynasty of Roman Emperors, was born 'Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus Nero and on becoming Emperor in the year 54 at the age of 16 took the name of "Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus". His death in A.D. 68 at the age of 30 led immediately to chaos, anarchy and civil war, "the year of the four Emperors". The author has entitled her sweeping book "Forgiving Nero". Forgiving would possibly be easier than the act of understanding him, for the focus of the book is the infamous man known to history as simply 'Nero'.

Mary Ann Bernal, with exquisite research, paints the reader a truly wide canvas as a backdrop, of Imperial Rome and beyond, whilst at the same time focussing on Nero, his extremely problematic immediate family, and the three individuals who truly love him and whose suffering is caused by him. The reader is well advised to pay the strictest attention, for the story as revealed and unfurled by Mary Ann Bernal is truly complicated, full of plot twists, suspicious deaths and murders. The stunning category of evil doing is truly hard to comprehend!

The book opens at the Palace of the Emperor Claudius, the replacement to the truly psychopathic Caligula. Claudius is amused and rather charmed by the terrified four year old boy, his nephew, standing before him, stiff as a guardsman. The little boy is Lucius, son of the formidable Agrippina, of whom more anon. As Guardian and the staunch physical and moral guide of the boy is the military man Traian Aelius Protacius. He and the young woman Vena, a young Gallic hostage and secret Christian appointed as nurse and servant, form two of the devoted triumvirate who will love, care and seek to protect Lucius for most of his young life. The name and reputation of Agrippina, sister of Caligula, is also commonly known to history as a by-word for lust, avarice and treachery, and she makes her mark very early on in the narrative as a thoroughly unpleasant, not to mention wicked and manipulative woman. She remains a very bad influence on the sensitive arts and music obsessed little boy. The third member of this doting and devoted trio is the little girl Acte, a freed slave of the household who attends his precocious recitals and soon becomes a devoted companion. It is these three who seek to act as a counter balance to the wickedness and evil of the The Court of Claudius, personified by Agrippina and the equally unpleasant Messalina, the third wife of Claudius.

The narrative is an absolute whirlwind of plot and counterplot, of violent and sudden death, and by the time the reader arrives at Chapter Twelve the board has almost been swept clear of its principal players. The Emperor and his son Britannicus are both dead - in highly suspicious circumstance to say the least! Claudius' third wife wife, Messalina, and Nero's Aunt Lepida have both been executed. Nero is now Emperor and convinced that he is in fact Divine and is reluctantly married to Octavia, daughter of Claudius. Agrippina, the principle evil architect of all the unpleasantness, has been supplanted and isolated from the son she has brought to power by Nero's new lover, the voluptuous Poppaea; and is also murdered after a highly elaborate plot. Nero, with Poppaea, now rules supreme.

In all this time, the faithful Traian, his secret wife, Vena, and Acte, the childhood sweetheart of Lucius, weave in and out of the action, all of them unable to take a direct hand in events and actually under threat as the boy Lucius inexorably mutates into Nero the man. The lives of Vena and Acte, separately kept away from Agrippina who hates them, first by Claudius and then by Traian, become interlinked with the infant and secret Christian Church. Traian is also kept distant by a transfer to the new Province of Britannia and can only occasionally offer sensible advice to the boy now lost to him. Acte, to her great sorrow, has already noted the change. Gone are their childhood dreams of an idyllic life together in Greece in an Empire of universal peace and harmony: "Once she knew how to pray to the one and only true God she could pray for Lucius to be the man he always craved to be, and not the man his mother created."

Traian, for his part, is equally sorrowed. To his dismay he learns of Nero's belief that he is in fact Divine. The boy Lucius is lost. "Nero was learning how powerful he was. He expected his orders to be followed without hesitation. And he eliminated anyone who stood in his way." In a rare meeting with Nero shortly after his mother's death, Traian asks what he has done, calling him Lucius: The Emperor replies: "I told you not to call me by that name. Lucius no longer exists. I am Nero. And I am your Emperor." The transformation is complete! "Did Lucius carry the spores of Caligula's madness within him? Would the budding shoots developing within Nero eventually take over his mind? Could it be stopped?" The answer is no. Nero spirals into self obsession, convinced of his own divinity and his largely misplaced belief in his genius in music and the Arts. Rivals and enemies, both real and imagined, are summarily removed and done to death, and Nero's profligate spending becomes utterly out of control.

Traian is sent once more to Britannia and the political situation further worsens. Poppaea contrives the terrible death of the hapless Octavia, whose head is carried to her and Nero plans an expensive Festival for the people, who clearly still adore him. His public acts have won him great support. The pregnant Poppaea is now Nero's wife and "deep within the Royal Residence, while Rome slept, perversion ruled".

At this point in the narrative the author finally arrives at the Great Fire of Rome for which, despite all his efforts to assist and alleviate the huge damage, Nero is blamed. Luckily for him, Poppaea is on hand with the helpful suggestion that the Christians should be blamed. This done, there occurs a savage persecution in which hundreds of Christians, including Paul of Tarsus, are murdered - torn to pieces by wild animals in the Arena, crucified or used as living torches. In the confusion Vena flees Rome and loses her memory after a savage attack by brigands. She is rescued by vineyard workers on an estate that is, in fact, gifted to Acte who had been placed there to escape the wrath of Agrippina. There Vena, renamed Julia, remains for a very long time while Traian tirelessly searches for his missing wife.

Nero, meanwhile, has descended into madness. He is spending ruinous amounts of money on himself and upon building a new Rome, devastated after the fire; especially upon a vast new Palace and a giant statue of himself. He is also haunted by ghosts, in particular those of Agrippina and Octavia. Although the people and the elite Praetorian are largely supportive, serious plots against him are emerging. Nero is suspicious of everyone, even his wife Poppaea who is pregnant for a second time. The tension rises even more when it is learned that Poppaea has died in childbirth. Rumours abound that her death was caused by being kicked in the stomach by Nero. Nero further outrages public opinion when it is learned that he has married a male slave he sees at Poppaea's funeral who bears more than a passing resemblance to his dead wife!

In almost his last outrageous act, Nero decides upon a lengthy tour of his beloved Greece, there, to general outrage,

to participate in the Greek Olympic Games. He is accompanied by a deeply concerned Traian who nurses him back to health after a near fatal crash in a chariot race. Nero is at last urgently summoned to return to Rome by the Senate where there is yet another growing crisis. Nero worsens the situation by committing an act of impiety upon entering the capital. Yet again, Traian ponders: "What happened to the idealistic boy who wanted to end corruption and work to better everyday life for ordinary people? He was one person in a cesspool of depravity, unable to swim through the mire without becoming debased." Clearly the end is near.

In these difficult times Traian, Acte and Vena are finally reunited and face an uncertain future but are united in their Christian faith, but the object of all their love and affection through the difficult and dangerous years is gone forever. Tormented by the ghosts of people he has destroyed, Nero wanders the vast Palace alone and deserted by all. The grain supply has failed and the people, previously his champions, are starving and turn against him. Equally seriously, he can no longer rely upon the support of the Praetorian Guard! With only a few loyal companions, Nero seeks to escape the vengeance of the Senate, the Army, the people and all his ghosts. Trapped in a suburban villa on the night of 9th June AD 68 at the age of 30, he takes his own life. His last words were, reportedly, "*Qualis artifex pereo*" - "*What an artist dies in me*".

And so, the long and protracted tragedy and morality tale is at an end and the diligent and attentive reader is to be congratulated for having followed all the twists and turns and gaining a clearer understanding of this difficult and tragic period of Roman history. The short life of the Emperor Nero is a fine illustration of Lord Acton's famous dictum:

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

Mary Ann Bernal is to be congratulated in presenting this impressive and daunting work to the reader! She has seized a truly chaotic and complex period of history, so crucial for all that was to come in the fortunes of Imperial Rome and, indeed, for subsequent history, by the scruff of the neck. Out of all the confusion, she has licked a wonderful narrative into shape! Given the truly chaotic segment of important history she has selected for her novel, this is no small achievement!

In a moving and multi stranded drama that incorporates so much, Mary Ann Bernal presents the reader, for example, with a truly 'ear at the door' view of the secretive early Christian Church and of all its travails. She reveals a clear view and understanding of the Rome of the time in minute and moving detail, and the everyday preoccupations and aspirations and fears of ordinary people, revealing painstaking research. The author relates with clarity, and movingly, the various issues and complications of people in love in truly difficult circumstances; their very moods and preoccupations.

Perhaps the greatest triumph of "Forgiving Nero" is the task, that many other historians have found so daunting, of weaving this truly confused and convoluted passage of history into a single and meaningful sequence of events whilst at the same time putting all too real flesh onto these historical, and often diabolical, figures. Above all, we have the figure of Nero! In the hands of the writer we are presented with a figure, so beguiling and charming in childhood and in early youth, transformed into a creature of monstrous depravity capable of truly despicable acts; a being seized by perhaps a hereditary madness and doomed to a bitter end.

"Forgiving Nero" by Mary Ann Bernal receives 5 stars from The Historical Fiction Company and the "Highly Recommended" award



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