

Fortune's Fool

Albert A. Bell Jr.

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Bell's is a mystery in a high literary realm.

Nero is dead, Vesuvius has devastated the land, and prominent Roman lawyer and author Pliny the Younger has become entangled in another murder, in *Fortune's Fool*, Bell's sixth fast-paced, erudite Roman-era mystery.

Pliny and entourage have settled at one of his estates near Lake Como. Hoping only to please his new wife, Livia, Pliny decides to expand the villa. It wasn't a love match, but rather an attempt to further family, political, and social alliances. Sadly, Livia's contributions to the marriage have been constant, greedy demands or loud, shrewish complaints. Within these opening scenes, Bell offers a good sense of Pliny, a decent man attempting to navigate treacherous social and political environs while remaining loyal to his intellect and to the person he loves most, Aurora, a female slave.

The expansion project demolishes a wall. Inside is entombed someone who is obviously a murder victim. Pliny becomes obsessed with learning the dead man's identity and finding his killers. Pliny moves easily among slaves, citizens plain and dubious, and other equestrians (knights), an aristocratic status enjoyed by Pliny and his historian friend Tacitus, a sometimes Watson to Pliny's Holmes. Bell's skills as a professional historian turn the Roman Empire into a referential totem as the pair search for clues in a taverna, while meeting on shaded courtyards, or racing across country on horseback.

While there are backstory gaps for those new to the series, Bell has the gift of filling out his supporting cast with distinctive minor players like Pliny's casually brutal stable-keeper. There's Livia, the repulsive wife tied to Pliny's ambitions and alliances, who's deliciously unlikable until Bell's portrait finds sadness behind her anger. Pliny's beloved childhood companion, the enchanting and exotically beautiful Aurora—quickly becoming Livia's target—continues as his bravest companion, wisest counselor, and faithful lover.

Adding *Fortune's Fool* to his Roman mystery series, Bell reinforces his place among those who are pushing the mystery beyond genre, toward the literary.

GARY PRESLEY (March/April 2017)

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