

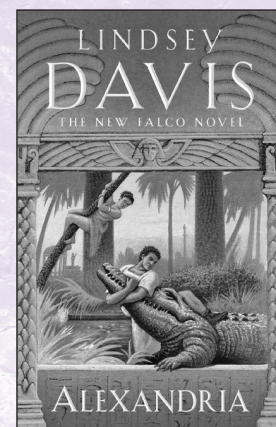
THE LINDSEY DAVIS

NEWSLETTER

Welcome, again, to our Newsletter, this time accompanying Alexandria. Some of you will have received your copy by post, others may pick it up at one of the events on my book tour; if so, you can be added to the mailing list if you contact us by letter, by emailing me through my website (below) or through lindseydavisnewsletter@randomhouse.co.uk. Why not keep absolutely up-to-date?

When I last wrote, which was two years ago, I told you I had been taking a break. It was not all idleness and relaxation. Find out more inside – and in the next Newsletter, later in 2009! Some of the time I spent researching in the British Library – and since I always enjoy double use of experiences, you may find my observations reflected in scenes in the new book which are set in the legendary Great Library of Alexandria. The polite and helpful staff, the educational exhibitions, the students with their laptops who have really gone to see their friends and to dream of one day writing novels . . . Not that there could ever be academic back-stabbing, murder, arson and fraud at that wonderful building on the Euston Road and I certainly never came across an on-site autopsy of a librarian who would end up mummified!

Read on, with my very best wishes,
Lindsey Davis



ISSUE 9 January 2009 www.lindseydavis.co.uk

C
CENTURY

QUIET PLEASE! IN THE GREAT LIBRARY

'I don't suppose you fancy Alexandria?'

Back in 2007, my friend Michelle, a Latin teacher in Minneapolis, had suggested a fun trip to Rome or Paris, but I had bigger ideas. Michelle fell for it, though squashing everything into her half-term break proved tricky, even before we confused ourselves over changing the clocks for British Summer Time the night before she needed to be up at six o'clock in the morning for her return flight to America – or was it seven o'clock? Or – as I had to tiptoe into her room to tell her horribly – five.

Egypt was bound to be a culture shock, but we had not allowed for the notice on the hotel lift, instructing guests what to do during an earthquake. So we tended to go up the stairs instead. We were doing that despondently after we found that the main archaeological attraction for Roman research, the famous Romano-Hellenic Museum, was closed for renovation indefinitely – and neither the travel agent nor even the Museum's own website had warned us. It was *so* closed, we could not even identify the building.

This was a massive disappointment because very little remains in Alexandria from Roman times. It was worse than Italy, where museums often close at short notice but there are plenty of others. This was a long way to have come, to see nothing. Because the city slipped into the sea during a catastrophic earthquake

(they do happen!) no one is sure where most of the legendary monuments even were. The locations of the fabulous royal palaces, the Great Library and the surrounding Museion district, Alexander's Tomb and Cleopatra's Monument are all 'conjectural'. Wonderful marine archaeology is now lifting huge sea-battered statues from the murky, mud-silted waters of the harbour, but identifying the ancient locations where these relics once stood is in its infancy; during our visit many finds were away on tour. The Lighthouse, or Pharos, survived partially for centuries but its ruins were used to build the great Islamic fort of Kait Bey in the fifteenth-century; we visited and were mobbed by curious schoolchildren. 'Pompey's Pillar' survives – but it was not built by or for Pompey. A Roman theatre and possible lecture halls have recently been discovered but are later than Falco's period. We had a good morning there, however, meeting a very helpful female archaeologist at the Villa of the Birds (Hadrianic, needless to say!). Afterwards we had lunch outside a cafe, imbibing the local atmosphere and watching the rather relaxed procedure as some vigiles-like policemen washed the sand out of their car engine and coaxed the vehicle back to life.

Just as we despaired of doing much useful work for the next novel, up those hotel stairs we went, heading for the little bar where Forster, Durrell and

other luminaries had once quenched their thirst. On a dark corner we were pulled up short by a startled cry of 'Lindsey Davis!' At last I had provided something to impress Michelle: even if it was only that, amazingly in a city of few tourists, we were being greeted by a woman who had met me the previous autumn at a mystery convention in Madison, Wisconsin! Our luck turned; the lady was with a knowledgeable travel guide, who did tell us about a smaller museum with some Roman remains.

I shall never be quite sure what Michelle made of it all, though she tells me she liked it and would go again. What a brave girl.

Since we weren't sure about liking it, we did first squeeze in a rapid couple of days in Cairo, thinking it might be our only chance to see the Pyramids and Sphinx. We hit Giza during a sandstorm – which came in handy later because there really was not enough room in my story for Falco and Helena to have a protracted visit, but I did want to show that the Romans, too, enjoyed Heritage Tourism. So, like us, they take a quick look through stinging sand, tick off their list of Seven Wonders of the World, and flee. Purely for interest, we thought, back in the city we went with our guide to see a medieval merchant's house that had been newly restored. When I came to try to find out what Roman town houses in Egypt were like, so I could describe where Uncle Fulvius stays, there was only limited information available; Egypt has no equivalent of Pompeii or Ostia Antica. Then our viewing in Cairo gave me unexpected ideas, because it seemed that there would have been a similar gated private courtyard and perhaps a similar layout centred on a flight of stairs.

We saw the Cairo Museum, which was certainly open, and contains the fabulous King Tutankhamun relics – which, it turned out, I could see at home when they came to the Millennium Dome! What impressed

Michelle and me most was the vast quantity of goods they have at Cairo. Travelling exhibitions tend to concentrate on the gold and enamelled funerary remains; they don't include such things as the Pharaoh's underpants and gloves.

The Cairo Museum is famously haphazard, that is part of its charm; we were delighted to stumble across a group of Fayoum portraits, hidden away in a corner. These are the painted face masks from Romano-Egyptian burials which are strikingly done from life and hauntingly realistic. Few historic paintings tell you so clearly that you are looking at the real face of someone who lived many hundreds of years ago, someone whose humanity was just like ours. A good reminder for a novelist.

And we saw the mummified Nile crocodiles. You can't tell from the book jacket of *Alexandria*, because there just is not enough room, but these chappies were much, much bigger than crocodiles nowadays. I would be having interesting conversations about it with editors and designers but I knew for certain that Sobek, the snappy pride of the Museion Zoo, would have been thirty feet long. That's twice the length of my lounge. I didn't just find the details on a website or in a book – I measured one of his mummified pals, pacing it out carefully alongside a glass case. Michelle said she was just glad she couldn't smell the beast; I sneakily might have liked that as my books are famous for their 'smells'...

What else did I gain from actually going to Egypt? For me, there is always value simply in seeing a place for myself. The sweep of the modern corniche at Alexandria may not follow the wharves of ancient times, but I gained a good sense of the huge curve of low, sunlit shoreline and saw how enormous Alexander's city always was. Horses and carts still amble among the cars. Daily life, and nightlife, in the streets could easily

be adapted to a much older perspective. The very sense of difference from all we know in Europe and America helped me envisage the uneasy reaction of first-century Romans, arriving from what they believed was the 'civilised world', when faced with this older, more eastern city with its own view of its culture and importance.

So: home to write.

I decided at the outset that *Alexandria* was to be about *Roman Egypt*. Even though Falco and his companions are acutely aware of the past, particularly the culture clash and that old power tussle leading to the Battle of Actium, I would avoid exotic pharaonic lore. Each to their own. I never like to write what other authors write. Pharaohs do not fascinate me. In my book there would be few mummies, pyramids or temples and no mystic hieroglyphics, sacred cats or wily eunuchs. Though riots were a local custom, the rich province to which Falco and his family come is ordered. People speak Greek; they hope their sons will obtain good jobs; they accumulate land and pay their taxes. The Roman Prefect holds diplomatic parties to encourage trade. His aides are twerps, but never mind; the legions are in charge.

My English and American editors were disappointed by the synopsis. They badly wanted a sinister muttering priest, cursing in the name of some harsh dog-headed god as he chases Falco down underground passageways. Poor old Falco – always getting stuck in some frightening dark place, where horrible rites are performed! But my editors are good lads, who know what sells. You will, therefore, find a modicum of muttering, though in my own style (wait and see)...

Difficulties of the usual kind quickly emerged. When the ancient city was destroyed by that earthquake

and the northern shore slid into the sea, most of the places I wanted to use disappeared into the water. The Library was to be central to my plot – yet we know nothing of its size, arrangement or decor, let alone arrangements for maintenance (though my civil service career as usual gave me some ideas about that). An academic dispute rages about whether the books were burned by Julius Caesar or just how many scrolls there were. People kept saying to me, 'Oh the Library had burned down!' I'm not having that. If it did, it must have been rebuilt. I made a joke of the 'holdings' question and I stand by the idea that the Library was still there when the Arabs invaded Alexandria in 640AD; they are said to have ordered the burning of the scrolls – heating the water in the baths for fully six months, with only the works of Aristotle preserved.

The Pharos was my planned location for an action set piece. If Falco wasn't going down a hole, he would have to run up a tower. At first it looked straightforward. I had books. Details, models and images on coins survive – but I soon realised I had problems. The most famous modern model is now 'thought to be inaccurate' (surprise!). We know that there was a beacon on top in Roman times, which means there *cannot* have been a cupola at that stage; the flames would have destroyed a roof. There are conflicting reports of what the colossal statue on its summit was, or whether there were in fact several statues. I found queries of my own – in a province where wood was so scarce, what fuel can have been used for the voracious beacon? I discovered a possible answer in a book about the rubbish heaps of Oxyrhynchus: reeds were used there in the bath houses. Well, that's my solution. And I included a rubbish heap for good measure. I always say my starting point is archaeology; I enjoy recycling facts!

We had a lovely time. That was important in subtle ways, because my characters would be travelling too. Falco and Helena would also be anxious on arrival and occasionally prejudiced, but soon won over by the achievements and culture of the new country they had come to see. I already knew that ‘research’ covers much more than where ancient buildings stood or how Roman administration worked. So my short trip with Michelle refreshed and inspired me, giving me a lead into my story as Falco and his family sail in past the Pharos to discover exotic new places in the company of like-minded friends.

And if you are ever caught in an earthquake, remember to follow the orders of the hotel staff who are, we were assured, trained. My advice is: don’t use the lift. For one thing, you never know who you might meet on the stairs. I met a fan. Falco, too, brushes past a mysterious visitor in his uncle’s rented town house: *Sometimes you know instinctively that whatever a man of commerce is selling, you do not want it...*

Well, he wouldn’t be Falco if his luck was as good as mine.

TWENTY YEARS ON . . . AND WHERE NEXT?

'The brain is at its peak at the age of 39' – so ran a newspaper article I read in the foyer of Random House when we were about to celebrate a new contract. Much guffawing ensued when I pointed out to my agent and editor that this meant they had both taken me on when I was at my best – since when it must have been all downhill for twenty years . . .

It was October 2008, and I was introspective for several reasons. First, I had hit the moment to track down my scraps of pension and to dream of my free travel pass. How handy that will be for the Century publicity budget. At a time of deep retrenchment, all publishers should be investing in frugal, value-for-money, slightly senior authors who get their kicks from glucosamine. We don't demand new author photographs, but hanker to look as we were fifteen years ago. We meet deadlines, because we are fearful we might die after one watercress salad too many, and – contrary to the instructions we have misfiled in our archives – some horrible hack who mixes up tenses will be hired to complete our manuscripts . . .

A consequence of reaching the age of orthopaedic shoes is that I have now been a published author for twenty years. *The Silver Pigs* appeared in 1989, introducing Falco, Helena, and many other much-loved characters.

So many, in fact, that I have to keep an archive to remember who they all are; it's gone from one fat folder to six so far and I just wish I could remember to keep checking my facts in those files. *Alexandria* is the nineteenth in the series, which with *The Course of Honour* makes twenty books, all of which are now with Random House and all still in print. That is a huge achievement, because novels generally have a much shorter shelf-life and, let's face it, many authors I know have been 'let go' by their publishers. A fresh young face is often thought to mean fresh and original material, even though we grumpy older authors think it just means plagiarism. ('Dear Lindsey Davies,' writes a bright young thingie from some other publisher than mine, 'we are very excited about our new author, Brash Doolally, and think he has the same quality that you have in your writing, the ability to breathe life into a place and time long gone; we hope you might give an endorsement to *Dangerously Similar*, about a detective, Marcus Spurius Ridiculus in First Century Rome . . .')

In 1989 nobody could have foreseen that there would be such a market for popular fiction about the Romans. It was thought too scary for the public, so all the more credit to my supporters that they were never put off. These were three very important people; throughout this long period I have been blessed

with the same endlessly loyal and tolerant team: my agent, Heather; my editor, Oliver; and my dear friend Richard. Together this colourful trio encouraged me, extolled me, read my manuscripts without being cruel, heard my crazy ideas with gentle restraint, nudged me back to the computer when I slumped, calmed me down when critics were dismissive or their reviews never happened at all, lunched, launched and laughed. Believe me, to have the same agent and editor for two decades is a shock publishing phenomenon. Agents tend to go to ground, go loco or even occasionally run off with the money. Those editors who have not been sacked or sent to be dried out in sanctuaries often leave to become agents – or, worse, to become writers. I have encouraged Heather to accumulate swathes of property like Monopoly houses, a portfolio that will need constant expensive maintenance, funded by Outer Mongolian royalties and Ruritanian digital download rights. I am delighted that Oliver has young children who will require him to be in a steady job and able to provide bicycles and ballet lessons. Falco's little Julia and Favonia would insist upon such things. So, how sensible it will be for Heather and Oliver to retain a tame author, churning out novels for the indefinite future.

But last October one person was missing. Richard had been defeated by cancer. I won't talk about it much. But as I now look to the future, his absence must be relevant. He was not Falco, but he inspired Falco. He loved researching Falco's world with me; over the past twenty years we shared so many happy trips to Italy and elsewhere, so many visits to museums and sites. He helped me choreograph fights and our dafter conversations often cropped up again in dialogue. He kept Falco tough with disparaging cries of 'A man would never do that!' while by example he also kept our hero humane, humorous and romantic.

Readers often urge me to write more in the Falco series. 'Don't ever stop!' plead the keenest fans. The fact is that I really don't know what I shall do. I had already decided several years ago that after so long with the same subjects, I could only contemplate one book ahead at a time. I cannot be sure whether I shall always find good quality Roman material or keep the inspiration to continue with my characters. Now, for other reasons, writing Falco novels may be too painful. But I always was a very independent writer – and of course, I still have Heather and Oliver.

The Falco series is very substantial. There are longer series – but not many. Some good news to announce to you is that I am definitely contracted to write ‘Falco 20’. I had planned to do this book, and I shall. Its title is *Nemesis* and Random House will publish it in June 2010.

Those of you who regularly look at my website (www.lindseydavis.co.uk) will know that we are simultaneously bringing out a ‘Companion’ to Falco (the actual title may change slightly). This will *not* be one of those arid compendiums that gather up dry facts, but will be definitely in my style – with lots of new material. We are trying to keep it within the price range of as many readers as possible, but we shall pack it with as much entertaining stuff as we can. This means that in 2009 I have a lot of creative work to complete. Some entails reviewing my past writing (more introspection!). It can be an odd experience for an author, not least if you find things you wish you could alter. I face it with mild trepidation – though I am encouraged by knowing that readers often tell me they have re-read the whole series and survived the pleasure.

I will be busy in other ways too. This Newsletter accompanies *Alexandria*, which is published in February. In September there is a new project – full details in a

further newsletter at the time, but let me give you a clue. In 1989 nobody who knew what they were doing tried to write about the Romans. Actually, even I really wanted to write about the Seventeenth Century. I had been wanting that since I was about fourteen and my Dad took me to the Reference Library, my first ever serious research, to look up what happened in Birmingham in the English Civil War. A while ago I tried out some ideas on my editor. ‘I don’t think I could sell a historical novel about *Birmingham!*’ cried Oliver, aghast. You would think after twenty years he would know he could trust me. I certainly know what an editor wants. What happened in Brum was rape and pillage – this turned out to be his favourite passage.

You will gather there is a book. For over three years it was my secret. I was writing Falco novels more slowly than before and saying I was on ‘gardening leave’. (How kind it was of readers not to point out that ‘gardening leave’ usually means someone has been suspended for financial chicanery!) I did genuinely want to slow down, taking off the pressure from churning out Falco novels so fast, and I did genuinely create my garden – though it is a very small triangle. I can also tell you now that over the past three years I wrote half a million words. That was *Saturnalia*, *Alexandria*, two short stories – and something else.

I hoped to extend my range as an author, for my own pleasure and to show that much as I love writing Falco I have other skills as a writer – maybe even to surpass *The Course of Honour* which aficionados reckon my best novel so far. *Rebels and Traitors* is a vast, diverse novel set in the English Civil War and Commonwealth. It is very different from Falco. To devotees of my Roman books I say, just keep an open mind and try it. All three of my team greeted it as my best work ever. The greatest recommendation I can give is that Richard, its first reader, thought it wonderful. He devoured chunks, demanding ‘Bring more story!’ even when he was in hospital. One of the last things I was ever able to tell him was that *Rebels and Traitors* was to be published by Random House, so I would be working with dear friends for his favourite book.

Then, just before his last operation, he said ruefully, ‘You had better do some writing!’ So you can be sure I shall do that.

Don’t ask me what. After *Nemesis* and the Companion I won’t be thinking about new work until 2010. But I think my readers will be pleased to know the financial adviser I consulted about my pension situation looked at the pathetic figures and said, ‘Take the lump sum and spend it on lunches. *Don’t plan on retiring for at least ten years!*’

Hic! Haec! Hoc!

Can anybody help me trace a man called Peter Godfrey, to whom those words may mean something special in the context of Falco and Petronius? He gave me a wonderful picture once and I would like to ask him something about it.

EVENTS

February

Sunday 22 February at 2pm

Scribes & Scribbles in association with Waterstone's
at The Guildhall Market Place, Salisbury, SP1 1JH.

Tickets: £4 (no concessions). Tel 01722 434 434
or online: www.cityhallsalisbury.co.uk

Thursday 26 February at 7pm

St Albans Library in association with Hertfordshire Libraries
& the Verulamium Museum at The Town Hall Market Place,
St Albans, AL3 5DJ.

Tickets: £3. Tel: 01438 737 333

March

Tuesday 3 March at 7pm

York Festival of Literature at The National Centre for Early Music,
Walmsgate, York. Tickets: £5. Tel: 01904 552 815

Friday 13 March at 7.30pm

The Glasgow Festival (Aye Write) at The Mitchell Library,
North Street, Glasgow G3 7DN.

Tickets: £7/£6. Tel: 0844 847 1683 (Ticket line opens on 17 January)

SAYING THANK YOU TO RICHARD:

Anyone who has enjoyed my work owes a debt to this man. I am raising funds in his memory and if you would like to help, you can donate online to Cancer Research UK; this is the registered charity that has always received royalties from *Shadows in Bronze* in memory of my friend Margaret who gave me part-time work when I was struggling to become a writer. Donations are now being ear-marked for kidney cancer. While stocks last, there is an offer on my website to say thank you to those who donate.

The way to do it is via:

<http://www.justgiving.com/lindseydavis1>

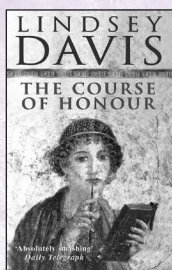
More information about Lindsey Davis, all her books, news and events can be found at
Lindsey's own website www.lindseydavis.co.uk

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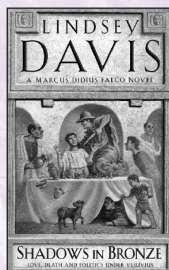
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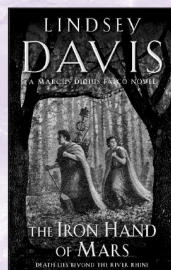
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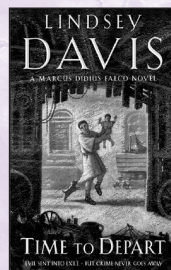
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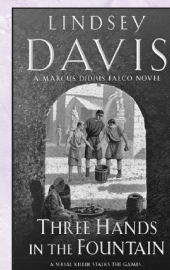
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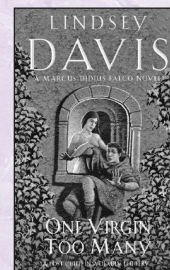
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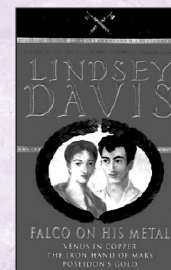
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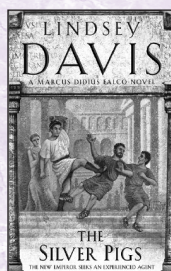
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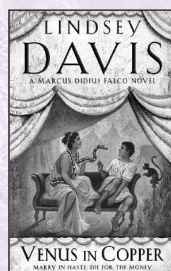
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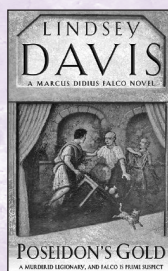
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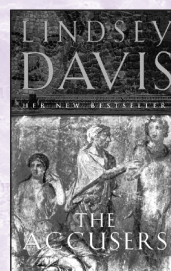
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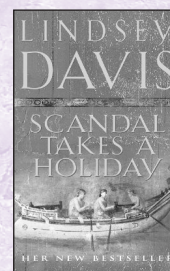
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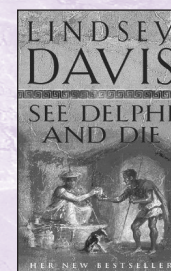
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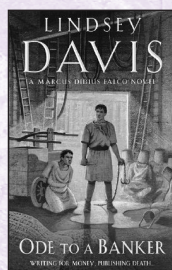
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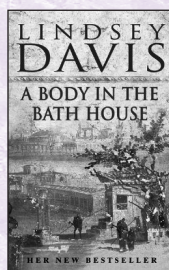
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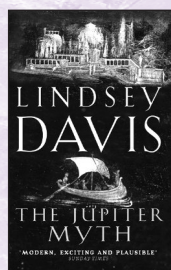
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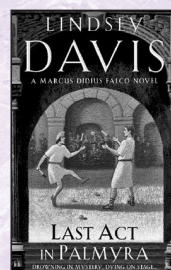
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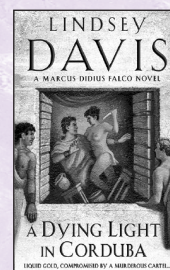
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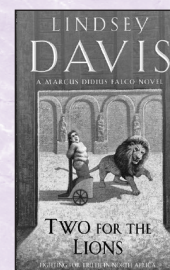
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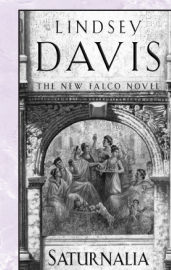
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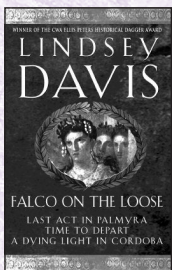
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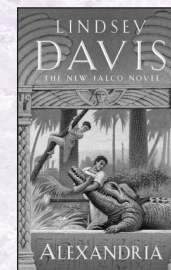


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XI

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£18.99
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from 5 February 2009



★ Reissue edition available in paperback from 5 February 2009

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The Iron Hand of Mars	9780099515081		£7.99
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