



The Emperor's Knives

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The seventh novel in Anthony Riches' acclaimed Empire sequence brings Marcus Aquila back to Rome, hunting the men who destroyed his family.

But the revenge he craves may cost him and those around him dearly.

The young centurion's urge to exact his own brutal justice upon the shadowy cabal of assassins who butchered his family means that he must face them on their own ground, risking his own death at their hands.

A senator, a gang boss, a praetorian officer and, deadliest of all, champion gladiator Mortiferum - the Death Bringer - lie in wait.

The knives are unsheathed, and ready for blood . . .

The Emperor's Knives Details

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Author : Anthony Riches

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From Reader Review The Emperor's Knives for online ebook

Michael Jecks says

In this, the seventh volume of his series, Tony has brought his young hero, Marcus Aquila, back to Rome itself, to find the men who were responsible for the murder of his family. He has to face them, no matter what the risk to himself. Four men: a senator, a gang boss, a praetorian officer, and finally a gladiator – he must confront and kill them all. No easy task for a man since they are all powerful in Rome. But the legionary won't give up. Even when he realises he must pitch himself against Rome's greatest gladiator.

This is a book that feels perfect, written by one of the best historical writers today, and with this Anthony Riches is on his very best form. There is something about the characterisations of the main characters that makes them come alive. The nastier types are superbly, oleagiously bad, and all, from them to Marcus and his friends, are convincing, realistic and believable.

I read THE EMPEROR'S KNIVES in a couple of sittings. There were plenty of distractions, from in-flight movies to bars, but I sat and read. If you like historical fiction, especially Roman, I recommend you try this!

Laurence says

I didn't like how characters seemed to be explaining the plotting and things that had been happening a lot in this book, rather than things unraveling more naturally.

Also, a lot of eye rolling moments in this book. A bunch of bad guys died while our scooby gang can all have a laugh at the end over some watered wine. Save the damsel slave, Dubnus. Be the most skilled (but ever noble) fighters in the whole empire with no equals, challenges or real threats, heroes. You don't need a layer of fat as gladiator (oh we'll infiltrate a gladiator school so that we can make that one of this books cliched tropes) if you're so skilled that you never get touched. Oh come on.

Oh, while I remember. Now our heroes are beholden to a scheming puppet master behind the emperor's throne? Have we not read Simon Scarrow?

Romanticamente Fantasy says

Recensione in ANTEPRIMA

Tutti ricordano l'imperatore Commodo, non fosse altro perché il film "Il Gladiatore" lo ha reso immortale e

ne conoscono, a grandi linee, la passione per i ludi e i lussi sfrenati.

Ciò che però non tutti sanno è come l'augusto giovanotto si procurasse i soldi per mantenere il suo esoso stile di vita.

Il romanzo ci narra di come quattro persone, le Lame, si occupassero di accusare di tradimento i senatori più abbienti, allo scopo di requisirgli tutto e, dopo una rapida esecuzione, procedessero a rapirne i congiunti e gli schiavi, allo scopo di offrirli in pasto ai più perversi potenti romani durante feste private dedite allo stupro e alla morte.

Questa drammatica sorte è toccata anche alla famiglia di Marco Valerio Aquila, ufficiale veterano delle campagne britanne, di ritorno in patria con la sposa e il figlioletto.

La legittima sete di vendetta lo porterà ad esigere il prezzo del sangue dai colpevoli di tali misfatti che tuttavia, sono quattro personaggi molto potenti dell'Urbe.

Riuscirà Marco Valerio nell'intento e, nel caso, potrà finalmente dirsi soddisfatto? O metterà a repentaglio sé stesso e la nuova famiglia per non trovare neppure la pace?

Si tratta di un romanzo storico dove le nozioni accademiche sono stemperate da ben più godibili descrizioni di intrighi e combattimenti gladiatorii, parte quest'ultima, trattata in modo molto approfondito, aprendoci uno spiraglio sugli usi e sulla vita degli occupanti dell'arena.

Il protagonista, un tempo giovane nobile romano, addestrato al combattimento dal più famoso gladiatore, avrebbe le carte in regola per restare un personaggio memorabile e invece non riesce mai a bucare le pagine, accontentandosi del solo ruolo di vendicatore, per cui si gioca tutto, incurante del destino di sua moglie e di suo figlio.

La sua sposa Felicia, invece, pur comparendo in pochi e brevi istanti, risulta una donna a tutto tondo, moglie devota eppure indipendente, medico militare e madre affettuosa, insomma un personaggio davvero piacevole.

Interessanti i soggetti che fanno da sfondo e cornice a questa vicenda di odio e di sangue, sia quelli positivi sia, e ancor di più, i cattivi della situazione, alcuni così perversi da risultare ributtanti, eppure resi quasi affascinanti dalla loro complessa natura.

È dunque con un augurio di buona lettura che vi lascio a questo libro, magari non eccezionale ma sicuramente godibile.

Buff - per RFS

Kate says

Fantastic addition to this wonderful series - and an important one, too, marking a turning point for Marcus Aquila. Packed to the hilt with action and twists, too. I thoroughly enjoyed the portrait of Rome and will now never see the Colosseum in quite the same way. Great stuff!

Greg at 2 Book Lovers Reviews says

By the time you reach book seven in a series, you should know what to expect. If you didn't like the previous books, what the hell are you even doing here? With *Wounds of Honour*, Anthony Riches opened up a whole new world of books for me; one with Roman Legions marching through hordes of blue-nosed barbarians. I have become a huge fan of Riches, as well as a few others in the genre.

For me, *The Emperor's Knives* has brought Marcus Aquila's story full circle. In book one, Marcus fled Rome before his family was unjustly destroyed by a corrupted, incontestable power. Now Marcus is back in Rome with vengeance on his mind. Riches has made Marcus a part of my life – I want him to avenge his loss, obtain some sort of peace of mind and enjoy the life that he has created for himself.

This book was different from the previous books in the series. Riches has built a compelling story filled with intrigue, twists and turns. It made me curious as to how Marcus would go about getting vengeance. It was filled with several side stories that kept the flow of the story moving. He had some old friends and enemies show up for fun and shock value. But *The Emperor's Knives* was on a smaller scale. Riches' strength has always been the epic battle scenes. He has the ability to give an exact description of the big picture/bird's-eye view of the action, while zooming in and out on certain key individuals within the battle. *The Emperor's Knives* lacked the epic battle; I missed it.

I know that there are more books to come in the series. I am certainly curious to see where Riches takes his characters, however, *The Emperor's Knives* could stand as a fitting end to the series.

Nick Brett says

This is a slight diversion from the previous books, but it needed to be. This very engaging series has always been about Marcus, a young man on the run from mad emperor Commodus and 'hiding' amongst the troops on Hadrian's Wall. The books then developed the character of Marcus and as readers we became attached to the Tungrian troops he was fighting with. So cue some very entertaining books about the action both Marcus and his colleagues get involved with and the occasional 'will his past catch up with him'. But Marcus has always been on a journey of revenge and that journey was always going to end up in Rome. The previous book took the story back to Rome, but in this book the author has rightly decided to put some resolution in place and take the story in a new direction. This is full of complex and interesting characters and a plot that keeps you on your toes while managing to throw more than a few surprises at you. It brings Rome to life as both a place and a setting for a lot of unpleasant stuff during a period of significant turmoil.

So this is a story of politics, plots and revenge. Our Tungrians take a lesser role (and no big battles here) but still feature in an entertaining way. But this is about whether Marcus will get his revenge and how much may he have to sacrifice to achieve it.

I have seen comments that some readers are disappointed in the lack of Tungrian battlefield action but this is a novel that was timely and needed to happen. It opens the door and signposts some great adventures ahead.

It's a deep and intense book and I enjoyed it a great deal.

In the edition I read, there is a short story at the back relating to one of the characters. Almost worth reading first as it puts some things into perspective.

Mary says

In Book 7 of Anthony Riches' Empire series of novels, the hero, Marcus Tribulus Corvus, formerly Marcus Valerius Aquila, finally gets the opportunity to return to Rome and take revenge on Praetorian Prefect Tigridius Perennis and his cadre of assassins who slaughtered Marcus' family to confiscate their wealth. But, the four men, referred to as "The Emperor's Knives," present quite a challenge to Marcus and his officer comrades, who have sworn to help him. One is a serving Praetorian officer. Another is the leader of one of Rome's most vicious street gangs. The third is a powerful senator with a taste for salacious entertainment and the last is none other than Rome's reigning gladiatorial champion.

A senator whose son served with Marcus in Dacia has hired an informant to assist Marcus and his friends. But, the duplicitous informant, a ruthless former imperial grain officer Marcus encountered in Britannia, has several employers with different agendas. Although he seems to be providing accurate information, Marcus is certain he will ultimately lead them to a disastrous outcome. So Marcus recruits some of the Tungrians to become street-savvy spies themselves to ensure Marcus, Tribune Scaurus and Marcus' assorted barbarian companions won't end up at the wrong end of Emperor Commodus' sword before their mission is completed.

In the other six novels, we have seen Marcus use his formidable swordsmanship to get out of almost impossible situations. Now we have a chance to see Marcus pit his skills against some of the best gladiators in the Flavian amphitheater in his final act of revenge.

Riches' vibrant descriptions of combat that even include details of which foot is used to pivot or launch an attack result in the reader feeling totally involved in the action. His descriptions of ancient Rome's back alleys and less than savory street life are also quite evocative. As is the case in his other books, Riches maintains suspense with a well organized and fast-paced narrative while reserving a few surprises for the revealing conclusion.

I was surprised, though, that one loose thread was not addressed. Marcus had learned in a previous novel that his younger brother had been sold into slavery. However, he apparently makes no effort to locate his brother or ascertain if he still lives. Maybe this issue will be addressed in a future book.

Once again I highly recommend this entire series!

Speesh says

There should be some sort of drinking game, the sort of thing I'm sure Anthony Riches would approve of, based on all the eyebrow raising going on in his books, Especially 'The Emperor's Knives.' You take a drink every time a character raises his eyebrows (I say 'his,' because the affliction does seem to be limited to the male characters in the books. Not that there are many female characters here or in any of the books so far.

Offhand, I can think of four. Marcus's wife, the other wife who used to be a brothel owner, the sister of a character in 'The Wolf's Gold' and assorted prostitutes who are not featured long enough to be named). The trouble with the game would be - you be pissed before you got out of the prologue. Okay, maybe that's being a little harsh - Chapter 1 then.

Now that the shock of the new has worn off, it's clear that by now, book 7, the writing is really quite dreadful. Toe-curlingly, amateurishly bad in (many) places. Now that they're in Rome, it's not possible to have quite so many set-piece, pitched battles. So we're getting into the seamier side of Roman double-dealing. Words. Don't mean what they say, don't say what they mean. So, instead of swords and spears having the cutting edge, it's words and meanings. Or, it would have been in the hands of a better writer. I'm maybe being a little harsh on poor Anthony, having come to TEK off the back of a couple of almost exquisitely well written books ('A Colder War' and 'Natchez Burning'), but even compared to some of the recent books I've read recently from his own genre ('Vespasian II' or 'The Lion & The Lamb'), then this really isn't up to it. Nowhere near.

And, I don't do the whole Marcus haunted by his ancestors appearing several times a night, every night, in his dreams. And speaking to him. Not at his will, but theirs'. Doesn't happen. Outside of books.

But, on with the bit I enjoy. The piss-taking. The raised eyebrow-count has, by book 7, reached epidemic levels. The characters in 'The Emperor's Knives Strike Back' haven't progressed to the rolling of eyes, yet. That's surely the province of the reader as he/she comes across YET another one, either as part of a cluster, or merely an isolated, inappropriate example, standing out like the balls on a bulldog.

Eyebrows this time out, include such beauties as;

"Scaurus raised an eyebrow at the younger man."

"Sigilis raised an eyebrow."

"He pondered Scaurus' turned head and raised eyebrow for a moment before speaking again."

"He raised an eyebrow and waited, keeping his face utterly immobile..." (You try that).

"Sigilis raised an incredulous eyebrow."

"He shot Marcus a knowing glance and then raised a questioning eyebrow at Scaurus..."

"Albinus raised his eyebrows in mock terror."

And those are just in the FIRST CHAPTER.

Best of the rest:

"His first spear raised a knowing eyebrow"

Even the kids are at it by Chapter 4. "The child raised an expectant eyebrow."

"Dubnus raised an amused eyebrow..."

"His counterpart raised a disbelieving eyebrow."

"Cleander raised a conspiratorial eyebrow."

"...his eyebrows raised for emphasis."

Scaurus is still the one with the most raised eyebrows in the series, in fact, his eyebrows are rarely NOT raised. But he outdoes even his previous best, with, while pausing, "raising an interrogatory eyebrow."

"Mortiferum raising an amused eyebrow as he slid his feet across the sand..." He's not dancing, he's making sure he doesn't fall over anything in the arena.

Coupled with characters constantly inclining, bobbing and shaking their heads, often in recognition of each other's 'points', sometimes inside the same conversation, it reads like watching the mating dance of the Great Crested bleeding' Grebe at times.

"He raised an eyebrow Saurus, who acknowledged the point with a nod."

"Cleander inclined his head in recognition of the point."

Then, it just gets ridiculous:

On page 133: "Exingus waited for a moment, allowing Albinus to speak again if he so wished, but the other man simply fixed him with a hard stare and raised his eyebrows.

'Continue.'

'As I said, this was no suicide. Aquila and that brute of a centurion who accompanies him everywhere, jumped Centurion Dorso and his men on the street, killed the bodyguards, and dragged Dorso into his private residence. They murdered him in a most gruesome way, dousing him with oil before setting light to him.'

Albinus raised his eyebrows in horror, staring up at the trees above them."

He was probably looking for wherever it was his eyebrows had flown off to, as there's no indication that they had come down from the previous time they shot up, just a shade over 18 seconds previously as I read it. And the trees? Where else would they be, if not above them, given Albinus has stared upwards? But, that's TWO times a character raises his eyebrows inside 9 lines! Not 9 chapters, pages, or even 9 paragraphs. 9 LINES. Tell me, in all honesty, that that doesn't stand out like a turd in a swimming pool? Tell me you don't think his Editor is missing something. Like their sight.

Actually, struggling to play catch up on the faces of Romans everywhere in Anthony Riches' Rome, is now the 'pursing' of lips. They're all at it as a sign of everything from deep thought, to inner turmoil, to estimation of how expensive that repair work is going to be (oh, wait, that was the plumber we had round recently). Pursing of the lips is obviously Anthony Riches' new black.

"Sigilis pursed his lips."

"He looked up at the four men around the table, pursing his lips in amusement..."

"Sigilis pursed his lips."

(A slight variation) "The accusing finger turned to point at the senator, who pouted back at him..."
POUTED?!

“The informer shrugged again and pursed his lips...”

“...and Scaurus pursed his lips as...”

“He pursed his lips and stared at Marcus for a moment.”

Most of those were in THE FIRST CHAPTER!

The constant eyebrow raising and pursing of lips (though to be fair, I can't actually recall a character doing both at the same time, maybe I should give it an extra half-star for that?) is like the Roger Moore Fan Club, on a drunken night out, just wandered into a Larry fucking Grayson convention (you maybe need to be British to get that one). The rest of you, look at the pictures (you need to visit my website).

And what do I mean by 'the repeats', the repeats. Well, try this little gem (from the Arena announcer) on for size:

“We are watching a scene from the divine Emperor Trajan's war against the Dacians, a piece of history well known to any man who fought in that bitterly fought campaign”.

Or; “Julianus allowed his breath to hiss slowly and almost imperceptibly from between his teeth, the tension slowly ebbing from his body as he realised...”

Oh, for FUCK'S sake!

Maybe the worst. Ever. The worst ever combination. Page 258, at the end of one scene, the start of another (hence the gap in the quote below):

“Come on, we can eat these as we go. Follow me and I'll show you a place you only want to visit once.

Once outside the domus's sprawling property, Scaurus raised an eyebrow at his first spear.”

The ultimate unholy alliance, the perfect storm. An eyebrow following a crazy, avoidable repeat.

But...even that George Clooney of a storm of inanity is bested by this:

P320: “...the champion threw himself into one last frenzied attack...”

Followed straight on with:

“His swords swinging almost incoherently as he stepped forward.”

(‘Incoherently’?! Incoherently; "incoherent [ɪŋkəˈhi(ʔ)rənt, ɪŋk-, -her-] adjective1 (of spoken or written language) expressed in an incomprehensible or confusing way; unclear: he screamed some incoherent threat. • (of a person) unable to speak intelligibly: I spluttered several more times before becoming incoherent. • (of an ideology, policy, or system) internally inconsistent; illogical: the film is ideologically incoherent.2 Physics (of waves) having no definite or stable phase relationship. DERIVATIVES incoherence noun. incoherency noun (pl. incoherencies) .incoherently adverb.” How ironic)

Ahem... on with the show:

P320 (FOUR lines later): “...in what was left of Flamma in one last glorious, fleeting display...”

P320 (SEVEN lines later): “Parrying one last desperate lunge inside...”

P320 (SEVEN lines later): "...smashing one last titanic back-fisted blow..."

P321 (32 lines later): "...agreed to give Cleander one last fatal day in the arena."

Thats FIVE inside 47 lines.

How on God's green earth is someone writing that, someone checking that and letting it go and then someone else not noticing it whilst reading the whole sorry mess? AND keeping their job? Well, blogging isn't actually a job, I know, but THE REST OF YOU?!!

Quite apart from the fact that Anthony Riches should notice, or at least get a slight tingle of déjà vu as he writes "*Insert character name, usually Scaurus, here* raised an eyebrow" (with or without a description of what kind - 'jaundiced' is becoming increasingly popular if the last two volumes are anything to go by), what about his editor of the publishing people? I have mused before about how I've read enough authors' Tweets and Facebook poses stating (something like) "book written, sending it off to editor." Then there come posts describing how they're now working through the list of suggestions changes and what even an author will more often than not describe as 'improvements.' So, why doesn't Anthony Riches' editor at Hodder and Whathaveyou, notice and pick him up on - at least - some of the eyebrows and repeats? Looking at Anthony Riches' not exactly welcoming profile picture on the book jacket, maybe he/she's too frightened of him to say anything. Or blind. There is NO WAY they couldn't have noticed (there's probably even a Braille version). I did and I work in a hospital. Cleaning (amongst other things, I hasten to add) cancer patients' toilets. Writing or reading books isn't MY ONE JOB. But, what about other reviewers? The Sunday Times has reviewed it (I think I saw), why didn't THEY mention something that stands out like a pimple on your backside? DO they notice them? Not in any of the reviews I searched just now. But the things are on just about every bloody page. You'd have to be blind (or Anthony Riches' Editor) not to notice them. Are they reading the books carefully enough? Are they reading the books? Or are they just re-typing out the press release that comes along with their review copy? I know what I think.

So, is it 'just me'? No.

They are there, on the page, in black on white, in the book in front of us. Those I'm quoting are quotes from the book in front of me, I'm not making them up, they won't go away. They are partly noticeable because they are NOT found in other books. I'm nearly finished with 'Natchez Burning' and in 800-odd pages, ONLY THREE sets of raised eyebrows. NONE in Charles Cumming's 'A Colder War.' That's THREE in over 1200-odd pages. Here, we've sometimes got three A PAGE. It isn't 'just me,' you know it. Sure, I do notice 'this sort of thing.' To do so was a large part of my job back in Advertising. I had to - amongst other things - write copy, check copy, edit copy, check addresses, phone numbers and repeated words. They should not go through. Not if we wanted to get paid, that is. So, I notice them. But no more than you do, admit it. Read the book, open a page at random, tell me I'm wrong.

They DO matter. They DO tear attention away from an otherwise reasonably interesting story. Let's get this straight. The idea and aims behind the story are good and well founded enough. It is in many ways a more developed, even intricate (well, intricate for the 'Empire' novels) story. It's just that the execution, if you'll forgive the pun, is so poor, that it serves to obscure, in a storm of eyebrows shooting here and there, a veritable Mexican wave of spreading arms (indicating supplication, apology and sometimes something else), a lemon-growers tasting-party of pursed lips and a Great Crested Grebe's mating dance of inclining and nodding of heads, that it's hard to take seriously. Despite the otherwise solid foundation.

From a possible five stars. Minus one for the eyebrows. Minus one for the pursed lips. Minus one star for the constant spreading of arms and hands. Minus one star for all the stupid repeats. Minus one star because the editor let them all go. Minus one star for falling back into the noble Gladiator, the 'sheep,' bastards,' 'rabble' in the arena who watch them. Plus one star for the solid story foundations and one star for me, because I've

made it all the way to book seven. One star for you if you read all this way. That's 2 stars.

Look. What does he care? I bought this in hardback then listened to it on Audible. So I've paid twice. I'm fully entitled to my opinions. They're based on OWNING the bloody thing twice - and MY EYES.

As I say, there does seem to be a decent semblance of a story and signs of an increase in confidence and ambition to the book, but it's struggling to come to the surface. However, the inanity and laziness means it's drowning, not waving.

Heath Knight says

more politically minded than previously, but enjoyable once you get your thinking cap on

Nick_britten says

Having survived their brush with the Emperor Commodus, the Tungrian Cohort take up residence in Rome awaiting their orders. For Centurion Corvus this is the opportunity he has been waiting for. Determined to avenge the killing of his family he must go up against the dark forces of the Imperial Palace.

This fearsome and shadowy group has Rome gripped by fear, used by the Imperial palace as assassins and revenue collectors, they make whole families disappear and ensure that their property ends up in the Imperial coffers.

From the heights of a Senator, though a Pratorian officer, street gang boss down to the deadliest of them all a Champion gladiator Corvus has sworn revenge on them all.

emperors-knives

With the unswerving support of his fellow officers and friends, Corvus knows he must descend into the murky and dangerous underworld of Rome if he is to avenge his family.

But Corvus must contend with more than just the dangers of going up against these men, his informant is an enemy from the past who is playing a game of his own and with rival factions within the senate showing an interest, Corvus must tread carefully if he is to survive.

The journey will take him from the depraved palaces for the Roman elite and all the perversions you can imagine to the roar of the crowd and fifty thousand people demanding blood in the Coliseum.

Corvus's enemies feel safe in their power and the terror they inspire but Corvus is made of iron and he has hatred burning in his veins and a determination to destroy the power of the Emperor's Knives.

The Emperor's Knives is the seventh book in Anthony Riches Empire series. I have been a fan of the books since the first, Wounds of Honour was published.

All of the previous books have been set on the far flung borders of the Empire and normally involves a set

piece battle against Rome's enemies, this book though is a real departure from this tried and tested formula.

Set in the murky and dangerous world of Rome and her inhabitants, this book features much more than the previous books. Riches explores the anger and bitterness that consumes Corvus and ultimately the futility of revenge but it also shows the power of friendship and comradeship that exists within a group of men who have to deal with death on a daily basis.

The dialogue is snappy and fast paced and I don't believe that there is a better writer in capturing the banter between soldiers, it can be rude and brutal but at times hilariously funny and on occasions will make you laugh out loud.

Its a clever story line and allows the reader to experience the full spectrum of Rome of the time. From the opulence and decadence of the Rome elite to the ordinary Roman and their daily struggle to survive and on to the glamour and danger of the gladiators you get a real feel of the attraction and revulsion of the power that is Rome.

This is one of those books that once you start reading you find it impossible to put down, I found myself still reading it a 3am on a school night. Its a gripping story and in my opinion is the best book of the series.

It will be interesting to see where Mr Riches will takes this series next but I know this book will be a hard act to follow.

Jasper says

originally posted at: <http://thebookplank.blogspot.com/2014...>

Roman fiction has always been a direction of fiction that I have read with a lot of pleasure. My first introduction was Nick Brown's Agent of Rome series, which is also published by Hodder and Stoughton. Anthony Riches first book in the Empire series, Wounds of Honour, was published back in 2009. Last February saw the release of the release of his seventh book in the Empire series, The Emperor's Knives. I very much wanted to read this book but was a bit dubbing whether to ask for a review copy, with already the seventh volume in this series I didn't know what to really expect so I was hoping for something of an summery of events or a paragraph of where the story stood. Luckily for me Anthony Riches build up his story with summarizing some past events that led up as to why Marcus Aquila is back in Rome. I might still miss a lot of the back story but I was able to enjoy the story of The Emperor's Knives. It also features great as an stand-alone, but in the end you will want more!

Anthony Riches introduced Marcus Aquila as his main protagonist in the first book and though my encounter with him is in his seventh book, it somehow feels that Marcus already has been through many ordeals and that they have shaped and changed him along the way. In the beginning of the book Marcus finds himself back in the City of Rome once again. He isn't their just for his own leisure, no, he is there with one goal only, taking revenge on the people that killed his father and ruined family. The people that he come to exact his revenge on are "lackey's" of the emperor better known as The Emperor's Knives, one is a senator, another an gang boss, the third a praetorian guard and last but definitely not the least is a fearsome and famous gladiator. Like I have already said this is my first encounter with Marcus and I have to say that his character was very cool to read about and feel well fleshed out. He is determined to get his revenge no matter the cost even if he has to sacrifice himself to get it. And now I can say that he has this soft side to it, since he does

has a wife and all but he hasn't... This man is driven by pure blood lust, he is deadly and you better not stand in his way. This is something that frankly hit me hard, I haven't read about such a powerful character in recent Roman fiction, and when Marcus starts his work it's just as his character, to the point. Though the roughness of Marcus's Anthony Riches does paint him with a certain delicateness to the side, it's not all unfound hatred. Marcus has been through a lot and is now settling the score once and for all. I was pleased with Marcus's character overall and in the end I kept saying to myself that I should have picked up these books much, much sooner.

As for several secondary characters there were quite a few that featured from The First Tungarian cohort such as Dubnus and Scaurus and quite a few more. The same here as for Marcus counts for them as well. Having no prior information on them it's hard to tell how they have progressed so far. But what I do can tell you is that they make up for a great addition to the life and times of Marcus in The Emperor's Knives, they brothers in all that they do and show a definite sign in tenacity to help Marcus reach his goal, even if their own lives are in the balance. I think if you and I would have lived in such a harsh time, that this is exactly the type of friendship and camaraderie you would have seen amongst soldiers. I hope I get a chance to backtrack this series since alone these characters produce an excellent part of the book and series alone.

The story of The Emperor's Knife is one of revenge with a capital R. Don't think that you will be reading a pretty straightforward story though, no, it's more on the contrary. From start to finish Anthony Riches kept on surprising me with a few minor plot twists and several big ones nearing the end. Anthony Riches builds up his in several layers first focusing on re-establishing the basis of Marcus. He is now back in Rome and gathering intelligence on the people that he wants to see dead. This takes Marcus to some shady places in the darkest reaches of Rome. After Marcus gets his intel he starts planning and finally confronting each of his enemies one at a time. I like how each of these encounters were told, it was directly in the way of crossing off a job on your to do list. These aren't just simple straightforward assassinations. Anthony Riches builds up a nice tense atmosphere during the final encounter of Marcus and his enemies or should I say victims? The first three of the emperor's knives are by far the easiest to eliminate for Marcus all the years of experience fighting for the Roman empire have helped Marcus a lot. But the last victim, the famed gladiator Mortiferum, is an unavoidable encounter that might cost Marcus his own life. This last encounter was one that brought a lot of the different elements in the story together. Of course a lot of the action took place in this last encounter but it also showed Marcus's character in his best way. One thing though... I had thought that with Marcus's last battle it would be over for him... but Anthony Riches really throws his plotline around. People haven't been who they were before and the scene with the emperor in the ending really put a smile on my face. Tying up loose ends... Brilliant. The story from start to finish was executed into the fine details.

Above I mentioned the last scene took place against a gladiator. When I read Roman fiction I am always hoping for some mighty fine battle scenes either on large scale or one-one encounters. From the moment that Marcus starts eliminating his enemies the amount of action starts to increase, though the fights were very contained in the one-one kind of scene there were written in a very, very good way. Anthony Riches definitely knows what he is doing when he created these various scenes. It felt like I was right there standing next to Marcus when he was doing his thing. If you can have let an protagonist act in such a way and write such a clear and engaging fighting scenes, it proves to me that you are a great author and know how to write with clear determination and even passion. Many of the action scenes are still brimming in the back of my mind, especially the one wherein Marcus took out the gang boss as well as the superb fighting that took place in the gladiator ring, not only against the human enemies but also against the beasts. Capturing such a controlled chaos is hard and Anthony Riches does it again and again!

The Emperor's Knives is a book right up my alley when it comes down to Roman fiction it has a lot of

themes working in its advantage. You have the political intrigue though it takes more place in the background in the earlier pages, it more comes to show in the ending of the book and reveal by it a great plot twists. It seems that people higher up the chain of command have had plans for Marcus's all along! This taken together with some mighty fine battles scenes both taking place in the confined spaces of houses and alleys as well as the majestic Colosseum, fighting against human opponents and bestial alike and a set of characters that Anthony Riches has been shaping and developing for over six and now seven books make this one book to add to your must read list. Did I mention to forget that ANthony Riches writing is one that is just spot on? It's engaging and addictive, you won't go wrong with *The Emperor's Knives*!!

Mieneke says

The latest instalment in Anthony Riches' *Empire* series is *The Emperor's Knives*. After a stint in Dacia and a short stay in Britannia, this outing takes Marcus and friends to the Eternal City, the Capital of the World, Rome itself. All of our favourite Tungrians are along for the ride and in Rome we meet some old acquaintances in the form of Senator Decimus Clodius Albinus, who we last saw in Dacia while still a legatus, and Tiberius Varius Excingus, someone Marcus last saw before his stay in Germania. These links are revealed early on, though never explained in-depth, but enough for a new reader to understand their context. And if that wasn't enough, there are gladiators! All of which makes for an exciting mix and a riveting story.

The book is filled with conspiracies and double crosses and no one's alliances are what they appear to be on the surface. Especially since Excingus' loyalties are for sale to the highest bidder and he also has his own agenda, which makes untangling the lines between all the players doubly complicated. In some cases, the mysterious talks become too mysterious, as at one point Scaurus has a talk with someone, whose identity I still haven't figured out. It's quite possible however that those who've read the entire series will know who this patron was. I also liked how Riches showed how quickly alliances in Rome could shift based on politics, honour, and personal gain.

Despite Excingus' ample help, almost leading Marcus and friends by the nose, in tracking and dealing with them, I was surprised by the apparent ease with which the first three Knives were dispatched. While the Tungrians are good, this was rather too easy. However, it does leave us free to follow Marcus in his quest to kill the last Knife, which forms the meat of the story. Marcus together with one of his fellow Tungrians joins the Dacian Ludus as a gladiator, so he can get close to Mortiferum, the last of the Emperor's Knives who killed his family. I loved this look at the inner workings of a gladiator school and the Flavian Amphitheatre better known as the Colosseum. There is an interesting metaphor for modern day celebrity culture to be found in the way gladiators became virtual slaves in order to win fame and fortune and the adulation of the people. Granted, not all gladiators became one by choice, it was also a punishment for criminals and the fate of many prisoners of war.

The philosophy behind this tale of revenge is interesting as in the end, Marcus himself admits revenge is hollow, feeling only emptiness once his revenge was accomplished instead of the satisfaction he'd expected to feel. There is a strange morality to this book where death is treated as an everyday occurrence and as a means of entertainment for the masses. In the previous two *Empire* books I've read the body count was equally high, but fascinatingly it only became disturbing in *The Emperor's Knives*. In all likelihood, this is due to the fact that many of the previous deaths took place in battle and this is a natural outcome of war,

while the deaths in this book are often quite premeditated, not only killing those marked for vengeance, but also relatively innocent bystanders, whose biggest crime was for example drawing guard duty on the wrong night. And of course, the blood-letting in the arena, where men, women, and beasts are sent out to die in horrible combat or other indignities—the larger the amount of blood spilled, the louder the watching crowds cheered. Marcus is an honourable man, he's never written as anything less, yet in this book he's also a cold-hearted killer, killing everything standing between him and the objects of his revenge, something that felt jarring and a little disturbing.

There is also a lot of humour and ingenuity in *The Emperor's Knives*. I loved the ruse the Tungrians set up to protect Felicia, when she goes to live in her father's house in the city of Rome, instead of the cohorts' barracks. The barber shop is fantastic and quite funny, especially the way that the less-than-reputable standard bearer Morban runs the shop. In the scenes in the shop and throughout the book there is an enormous amount of banter to be found; often it's off-colour and low-brow, at times dry or acidic, but it feels genuine and adds comic punctuation for the darker scenes in the book. My favourite addition to the cohorts' forces was the group of engineers headed by Avidus, as sappers are a special breed and I hope they'll be around in the next book as well.

The Emperor's Knives is a wonderful addition to the *Empire* series. Rounding out a multiple book story arc with Marcus' family avenged, it'll be interesting to see where Riches will take Marcus and the Tungrians next, especially given the commissions handed out at the end of the book. I'm really glad that I took a chance and started the Empire series five books in, as the three I've now read are excellent and Marcus and company make for great entertainment. While *The Emperor's Knives* needs perhaps a bit more grounding in the series than the previous two books, it still stands alone exceedingly well. If historical fiction set in the Roman Empire is to your taste, you can't afford to miss *The Emperor's Knives*.

This book was provided for review by the publisher.

Kenny says

Ah, gladiators. If you did a word association game with Rome, that's got to be amongst the first things our survey would say isn't it? So, after arriving in Rome at the end of the previous book, it wasn't a massive surprise to find that the arena was going to form a large part of the novel was it? This is the point where I give authors a huge amount of liberty - let's face it, there's a pretty much a deal with the reader that's 'listen, I know this series has tries to have a level of realism that set, pretty much around the first Die Hard? Well, now we're going with the Expendables. I mean, it's not like it's completely impossible this could happen, right (author winks at reader, readers share knowing grin). All forgiven - let's face it, gladiators are pretty cool, and who could turn them down in a blood and sandals series?

So, back to the tales of Marcus Aquila and his family fortunes. This one was quite a bit of fun in giving him a chance to address a major plot line with the killing of his family by Commodus (who is given some appearances straight out of Gladiator too). So Marcus and friends get a chance to get revenge on the four level bosses mainly responsible. So he can hunt them down in turn, with the last one - of course - being a Gladiator, which means, well, guess who has to join up. Which is one of the things that really does pull it somewhere between the Expendables and a bit more towards Scott Pilgrim...

But they're all good films (I say good, ok, SPVTW is actually...well, never mind, this is a book review). OK, it's not quite Edgar Wright, but even John McTiernan may have had a few questions... . In the end I could

award this 3.5 stars. I hope he keeps a bit of a sense of humour though...

S.J.A. Turney says

What can I say by book 7?

If you're a fan of the Roman era and you read books, then if you haven't started the Empire series by now, I can only assume you've been living in a darkened closet hiding from the CIA and living on pizza pushed under the door. Riches has solidly secured himself a place among the giants of Historical Fiction, vying with the likes of Ben Kane, Douglas Jackson and Manda Scott in terms of style, plot, character and readability.

If you are that pale frightened figure in the closet, risk the CIA spotting you, and rush out to a bookstore. Or buy from Amazon and have it delivered to your door. It's worth risking the possibility that Chuck and his black-suit-clad pals will find you. And here's why:

Most writers have trouble with such a long series, I think. Even the greatest (witness Sharp for example) hit a lull where it becomes formulaic and sags for a while. To keep things fresh through seven books it quite impressive on its own.

The 'EMPIRE' series has managed just that. In fact, I would say now, looking back over the series, that the first three books are much in a vein with one another as straight military history beat-em-ups with a little betrayal and secrecy stuff and a smattering of politics thrown into the mix. From book 4, however, Riches clearly decided that more could be done with his characters and began to expand the scope of the series. From German bandits and sacred woods to Romanian gold mines and Imperial betrayal and then back to Britain for a book and a covert mission that will overturn everything and leave our hero in the eternal city, the series exploded into variety and excitement on a previously undreamed-of level.

The characters became more complex and understandable, the settings more exciting and vivid, the plots more twisty and turny and fascinating, and all in all, the books endlessly readable.

The Emperor's Knives is the culmination of one particular story arc in the series. This is not a shock to anyone keeping up, just from the title. If you've got through, say, four or five of the books, you probably already have an inkling of what's coming in this volume.

If you're new to the series, check out reviews of the others and then come back. If you want to avoid the chance of spoiling things in the series so far, look away now and come back to the capitals...

So....

Look AWAY, I said!

Yes, Corvus/Aquila being back in Rome gives him the perfect opportunity to put old ghosts to rest and deal with the infamous group of imperial covert killers who have been murdering the aristocracy on imperial orders and acquiring their cash and land for the throne. A senator, a mob-boss, a Praetorian officer and a champion gladiator. All marked for death by our hero. But how will he go about it?

New characters are introduced, about whom we are already aware (including those who originally trained

Marcus in the martial skills) and old enemies reappear in stunning 'Bastard-o-colour'.

Yes, this is the culmination of the 'Aquila family betrayal and murder' plot, but then you knew that from the title! In this case, it's not about the destination, but about the journey. And what a ride. Corvus is about to get revenge in spectacular fashion.

OK. BACK TO THE NON-SPOILER STUFF

Be prepared. If you know Riches' work then by now you'll know he's got a tendency to throw in a few curveballs to wrong-foot the reader and screw his expectations. You're gonna get that. In spades. Several times in this, I found myself saying 'Oh? Oh, right. Well, then...' and then going back to the story.

Corvus/Aquila doesn't grow as a character, because he doesn't need to. At this point he's as fully fleshed out as he ever needs to be. More would just be OTT. But he does get some fantastic scenes, speeches and moves. And the supporting cast DO grow. Particularly Scaurus, who I already loved. New characters have appeared, some of whom will likely run through more books in the series, and some of whom are the stronger characters Riches has yet created.

The tale completes the aforesaid particular story arc but goes beyond, tying in more threads, and the end puts in place something for book 8 that I've been waiting for for ages. It is very easy when tying up a massive plot arc to leave it feeling either twee or contrived or both. This does not do so, though. This volume concludes in a most satisfactory and not entirely expected manner, leaving a couple of threads for future books and the reader feeling sated.

Riches' books, though, have two strengths which have always been in evidence and only grow with each release: They are break-neck paced, in the same fashion as Mike Arnold's civil war books, dragging the reader along in breathless admiration. And they are so realistically readable. There is simply no effort involved. You open the book and let go and the story whisks you along without any hard work. All in all, Riches is clearly still getting better with every book, which by book 7 is quite impressive!

It's out now. BUY IT, or I'll tell the CIA where you live and stop the pizza deliveries! Oh, and as a special incentive, the hardback includes a short story that you DO NOT WANT TO MISS!

Beorn says

Although I class myself as a fan of Riches' previous books, I was a little sceptical just how much I would like this book for reasons I'll outline first before I divulge my feelings on this book.

I'm someone who greatly prefers his historical fiction to be based around real historical events, preferably with set-piece battles, bloody intrigue and real figures from history; something you can go research afterwards. Aside from romance saturated novels, the kind of historical fiction I can't usually stand is "thrillers" that stay rooted in one particular location with the same old storylines rehashed.

So on the face of it when I sat down with this book, based very much on a key element of fictional characters in the universe Riches has created and rooted in one geographical spot, Rome, the signs weren't overly promising.

I've never been more happy to admit that all my scepticism was ill-founded.

Without giving too much detail away, the experience I found myself with reading this book was one of the author creating a superb level of not just detail and tangible characters but a plot that takes you by the hand, walks you along a path where you think you can see what's coming up ahead only for it to snake away and drop you somewhere else. There are lots of clever little nuances, details and threads interwoven, twisting, turning and snaking in and around each without ever seeming over the top or too overtly Machiavellian. The overall effect was of feeling like putty in the hands of the author as just when you thought you knew how things stood, a devilish reality was unveiled to show the truth that had been there all along, almost like a high end conjuror revealing the part of his trick that confirms you were his patsy all along.

Without wanting to wax too lyrical about the book or use many melodramatic metaphors, the way the story ebbs & flows and takes you on a ride is masterful and I challenge anyone to read this book without devouring the chapters like a hungry fat kid with free cake.

The author's back catalogue was already some of the finest examples of the kind of typical Roman fiction you can get - not to demean that genre at all - but augmented with plenty of clever little flourishes, plot manoeuvres, additional characters and above all such realism that you feel like you could step into the book. This book, while in a completely different setting, which arguably required a new narrative approach, shows that if anything Riches is not a one trick show pony but a writer more than capable of sucking you straight into a vipers nest of intrigue.

At times, such deep realism reminded me somewhat of the TV series 'Rome' for it's ability to truly scrape away with a massive metaphorical strigil the opulent golden image of the Roman Empire and dared to show the dark underbelly and human element.

Arguably Riches' finest book yet, and for someone who is already a committed fan of his earlier works that is saying something.

I feel I should add in the disclaimer that while, for a change in a series, you don't need to read the previous books in the series to 'get' the characters in this book though I would highly recommend it as Riches' greatest strength is arguably the highly realistic nature of his characters and the fondness with which all but the hardest of bastards will come to regard the key protagonists of the series. In other words, you grow so accustomed to them that you feel as close to them as you would a good friend or acquaintance.

At the risk of warbling on for far too long than necessary, suffice to say this is a superb book and, where other authors by three or four books into a series - let alone SEVEN! - have slipped into repetition and churning out any old filler, this sums up for me why Riches is arguably the best Roman fiction writer around.

I would say "HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!" but if you haven't read the previous six, all you'll get from me is a haughty look of disdain and a breathy "Psh, newbs". Go read the first six. Love them, then read this. You won't regret it.

I could quite happily give this book a full compliment of five out of five stars but I am far too much of a finicky old bastard to be so generous with such marks as they imply that the books are 'PERFECT', which very few books are.

If it were possible however, I would give this book 4.5/5 and be satisfied. As I can't, I'm afraid it's a 4 which, such is the fun I had with this book, leaves me with a sense that I sold it short of what it deserves.

Edit: Screw it, I gave it five so as not to disproportionately affect the average Goodreads score.
