

“Toga Porn”

WRITTEN BY JOANNE RENAUD

Sometimes it seems that everyone loves ancient Rome, like Coke or blue jeans. It's been a popular literary setting since the Middle Ages. The Last Days of Pompeii, written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1834, is considered a seminal piece of historical fiction. Victorians were particularly keen on all things Roman, and loved paintings depicting that era. It was “exotic”; it provided a high-brow excuse for naked people, and it made for a sexy getaway from corsets, locomotives and Christian morality.

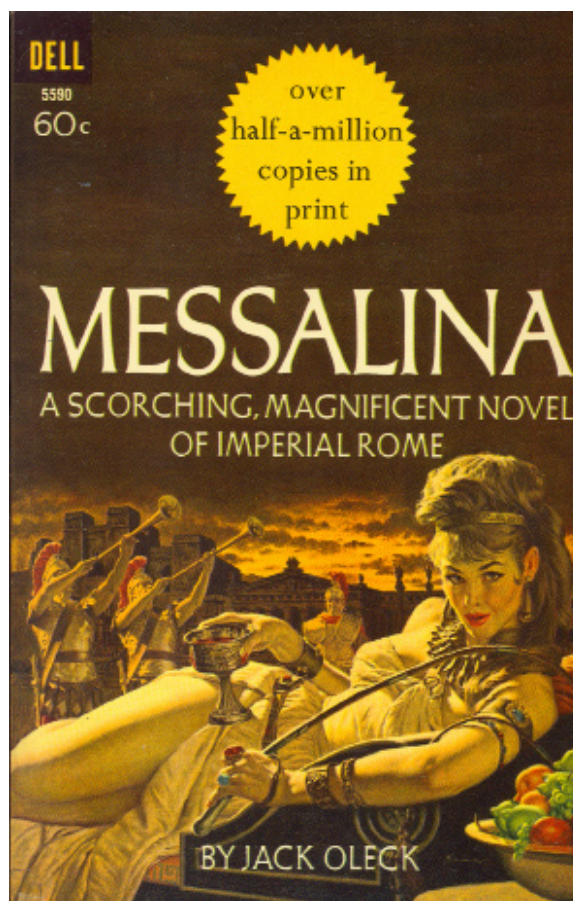
These same Victorian “Roman” paintings were so well-known that they were often used as a basis for films during the 1920s and '30s. Cecil B. DeMille discovered that ostensibly historical movies, set during pagan antiquity, made for boffo box office, especially when they featured axe-crazy gladiators and hotcha empresses. You could fool the censors and get away with lots of sex and violence, especially if your characters wore togas!

With the birth of the paperback book market in the '40s, writers who grew up with DeMille wrote suitably DeMille-esque historical novels about ancient times, ramping up the sex and violence by several more notches. And thus, the genre of TOGA PORN was born. This trend continued through the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s, with books ratcheting up the raunch until even Caligula might have blushed.

Scantily clad femme fatales like Messalina, Poppaea and Cleopatra prowl through palaces while manly centurions and gladiators glare

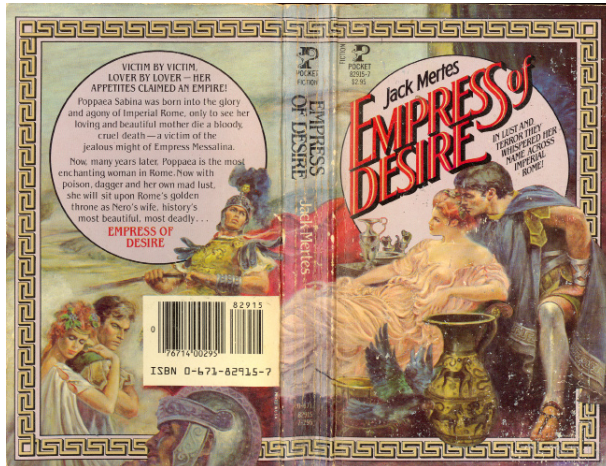
at them lustfully or fight to death in the background. Naturally this says more about postwar American pulp fantasies than what life was actually like 2000 years ago, but when the art is this cool to look at, who cares?

Even the worst paintings are a lot of fun to look at, with famous artists like James Bama, Bob Abbett and Manuel Sanjulian contributing



covers to various toga porn potboilers, with countless other covers created by artists who remained completely unknown and uncredited.

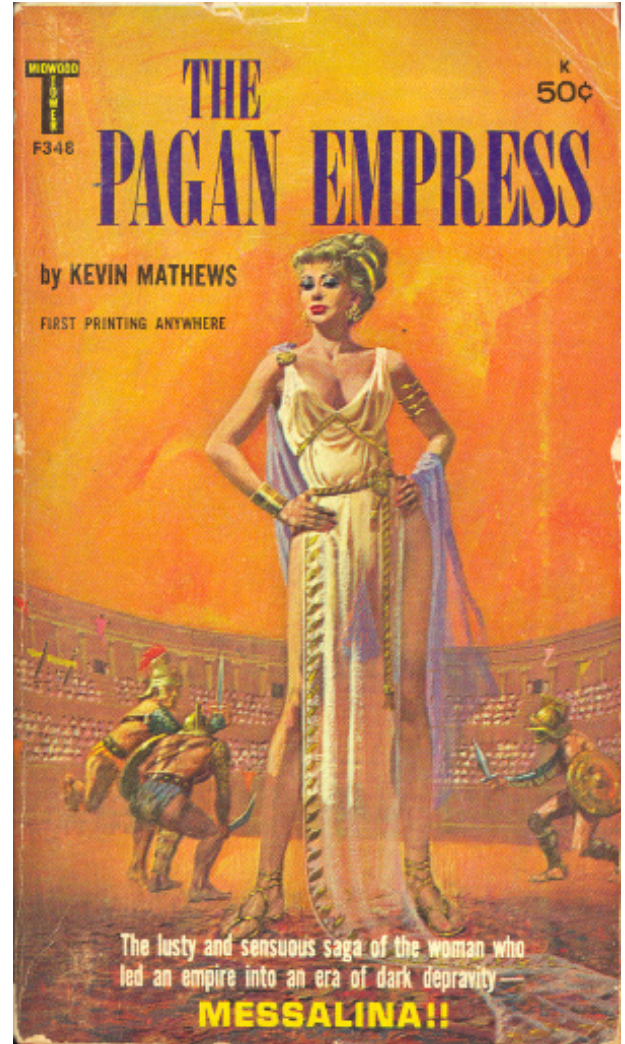
Messalina is a fun, trashy bodice (or stola) ripper by Jack Oleck, a Silver Age comic book writer who worked with the great Jack Kirby. Besides scripting for Foxhole and DC, he wrote a few novels on the side. He really struck gold with Messalina in 1959- the book went through many reprintings throughout the ‘60s, with new cover art every time. My personal favorite is this wonderful cover by James Bama-- who, hilariously enough, is better known for his paintings of cowboys. Here, Messalina is not



only into whips, she's clearly having lunch in the middle of the Forum. Like you do...

Here's a little-known romp, published in 1982 by the equally little-known Jack Mertes.

It's another "naughty empress" book, which in itself is a subgenre within the toga porn category. A better title of this particular epic would be Poppaea does Rome. I don't know who did the cover- there's no credit anywhere in the book- but it's a nice painting, with lots of well done, if completely random, details. (For example, note the parrot and the Mycenaean vase in the foreground on the front cover.) I especially love how the heroine's hair-- described as 'amber' in the book--is painted the color of strawberry Kool-Aid.

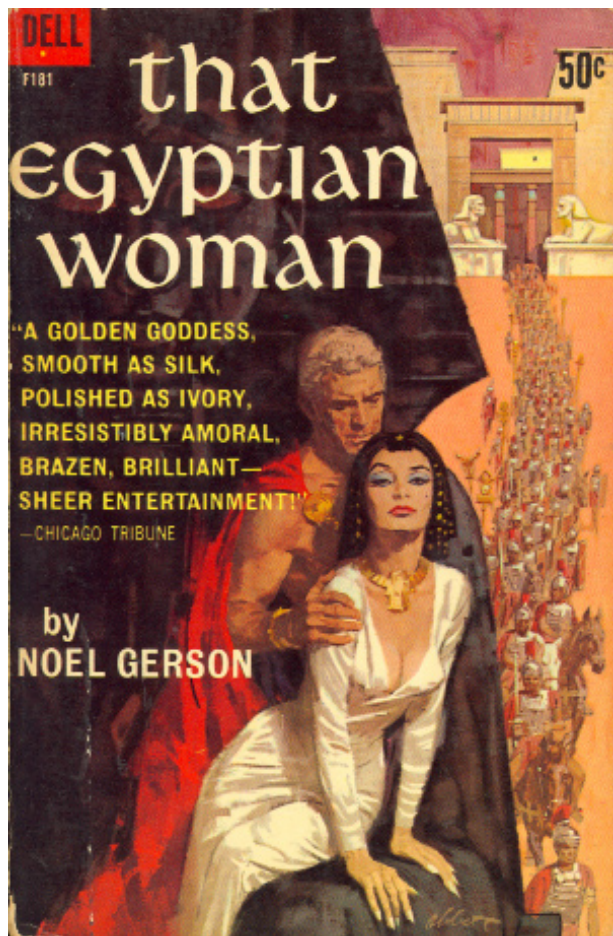


Another naughty empress book! Messalina, as you can tell, has an evergreen appeal. Pagan Empress was published in 1964 by Midwood Tower books, which specialized in sleaze. You've got to love the gladiators fighting over the blonde chick sporting an unlikely amount of blue eye shadow, and an equally unlikely outfit. Apparently in the book, though, Messy wears even odder costumes:

At first he thought a gladiator stood there in greave and mail and subligaculum. Then he saw the heavy breasts pushing naked about the leather strap that held the mail sleeve, the gently rounded belly with its deepset navel, and

the somewhat heavy thighs. It was Messalina, dressed as a secutor!

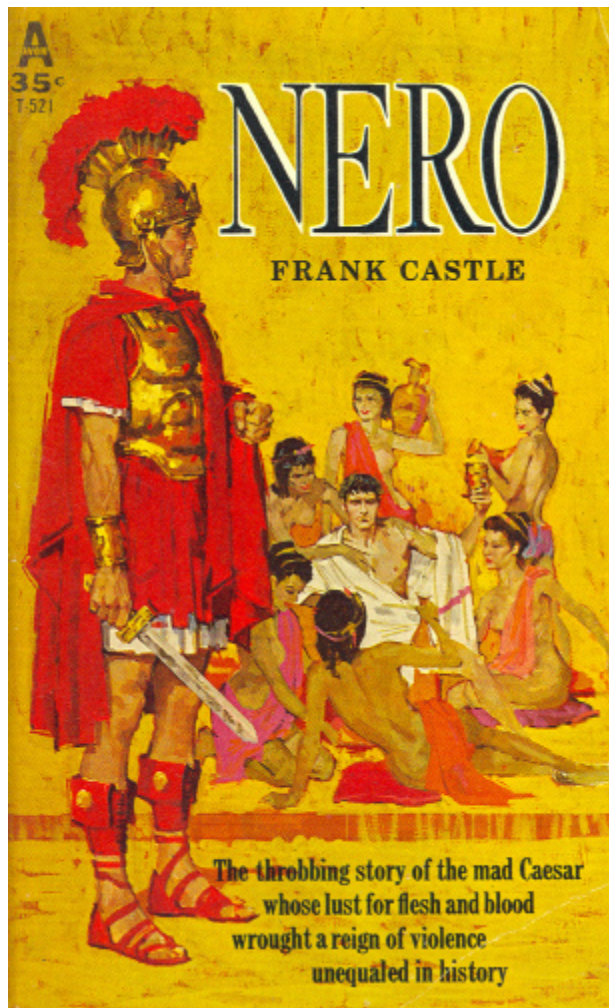
Remember kids, if it's got Latin in it, it automatically makes it classy!



And here we've got Cleopatra, circa 1962! This novel, with its cover by Bob Abbett, would have been considered more "respectable" than anything from Midwood Tower, as it was published by Dell and written by Noel Gerson, a veteran author of various frothy historicals. Julius looks like he's telling Cleo something very important, perhaps advising her to invest in mutual funds, but clearly she is thinking: "Mutual funds, ha! I am Egypt! I worry not about such things!"

I find it interesting that Abbett's version of

Cleo doesn't resemble Liz Taylor in the slightest (the filming of Cleopatra was getting a lot of publicity at this time), but instead looks almost exactly like Joan Collins from Land of the Pharaohs. I'm not sure what actor Julius looks like. Lee Marvin?



"Great Nero will sing!" someone cried, and hundreds of half-naked men and women stopped fondling to listen.

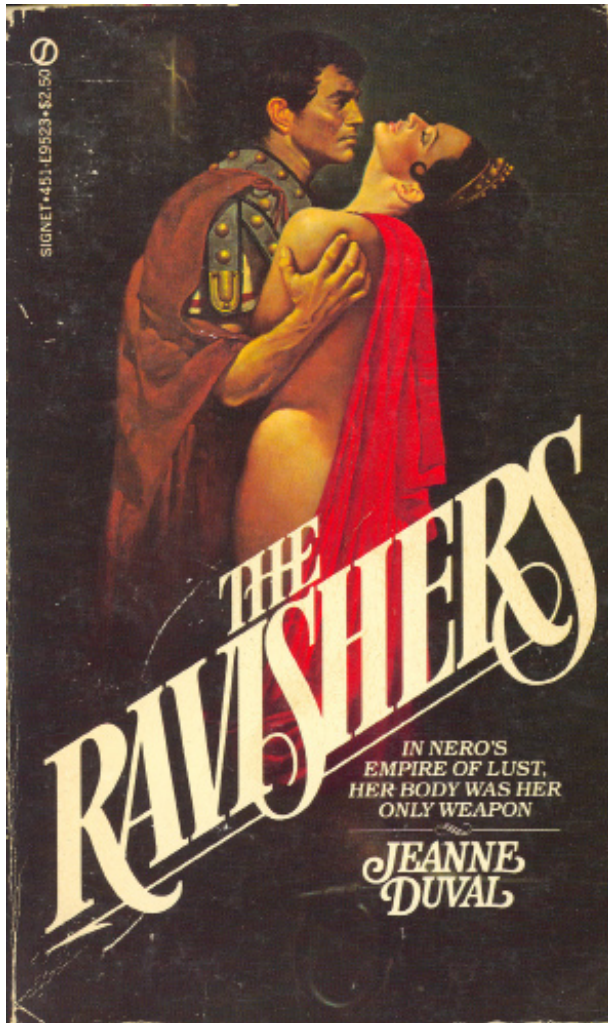
Yes, everybody loves Nero! As you can tell by the cover. Nero is one cool cat, surrounded by dozens of adoring fangirls (the image seems a touch racier than usual for 1961). The centurion looks rather sad, though, as if he wants to be Nero too, or at least join the party. Sorry, pal;

there can only be one, and like the Beatles, he’s bigger than Jesus! As the man himself says:

“I shall erect a great temple for worship of myself,” Nero declared. “Then these other foolish gods will be forgotten.”

to the next, and who is eventually reunited with her True Wuv just as Vesuvius blows its top, it’s more amusing than most books of this type. As usual, Sanjulian does beautiful work, although the heroine looks like her neck has just been broken—perhaps by the raw, throbbing power of the centurion’s passion?

As you can see, anything goes within the scorching, magnificent empire of lust that was ancient Rome—from orgies to gladiators to whip-wielding imperial nymphets. And so that glorious time will live on in the overheated imaginations of authors, who seek to leave behind their mundane lives and take their readers into the throbbing heart of a vanished realm.



In Nero’s empire of lust, her body was her only weapon!

And last but not least, we have *The Ravishers*, with cover art by Manuel Sanjulian. Although *The Ravishers* (written by Virginia Coffman, under the name of Jeanne Duval) is a stereotypical 1970s stola-ripper about a luckless girl who bounces from the bed of one emperor