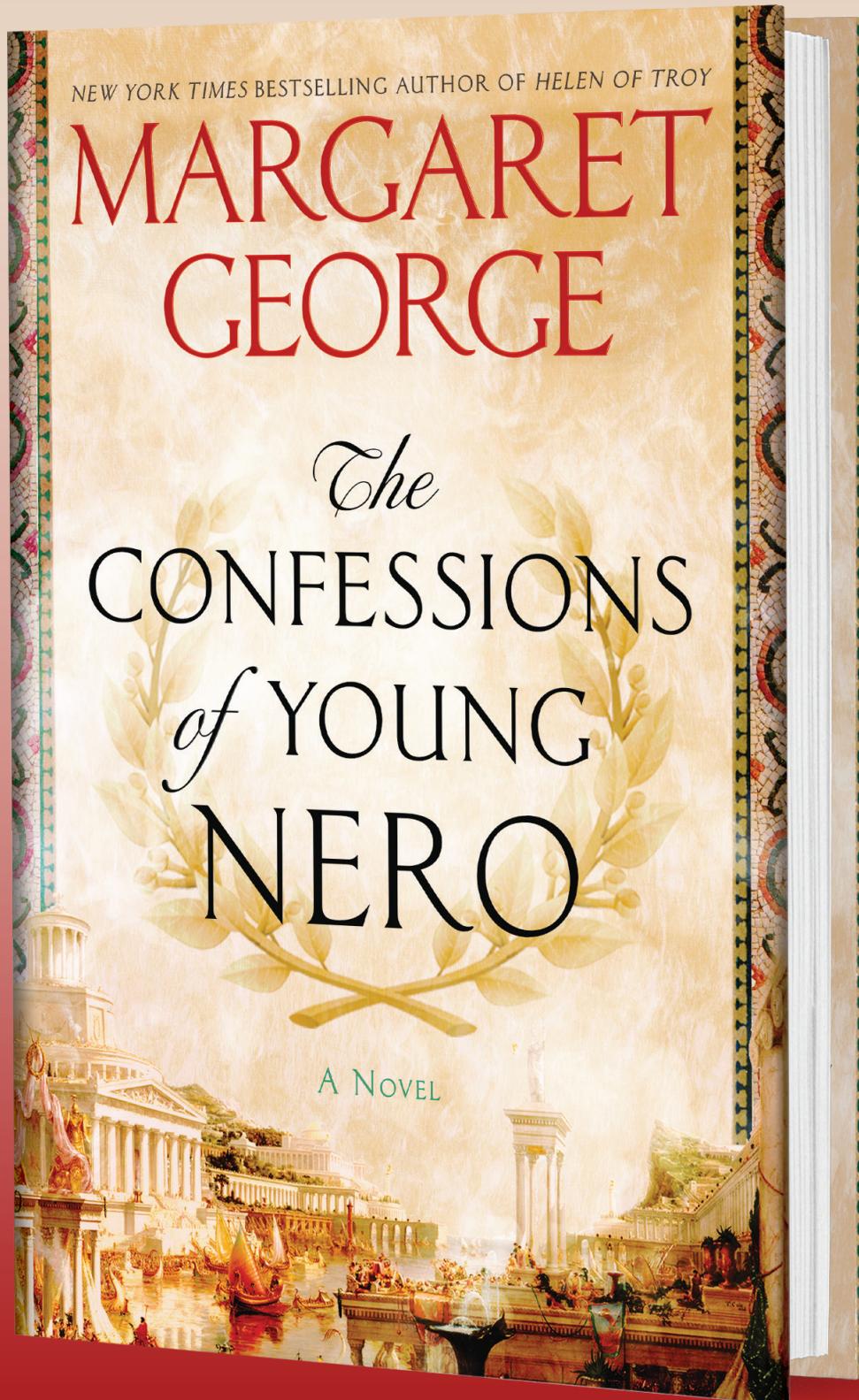


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# READER'S GUIDE *for* *The* CONFESSIONS of YOUNG NERO

*It has been observed that Nero and Oscar Wilde had much in common—both believed that life should be a work of art and that aesthetics was the most important aspect of living. Both, too, treated life and sexuality as theater. Because of it, both came to a bad end, although the things they practiced are tolerated, if not condoned, today. Oscar Wilde's quip at Customs ("I have nothing to declare but my genius!") and Nero's last words ("What an artist the world is losing!") are very similar.*

- 1 From his childhood on, Nero showed an interest in art and music. His earliest tutor, Paris, was an actor, and music was part of his education. How much influence do you think Paris had on him, teaching him at an influential age?  
  
Do you think art became a refuge for Nero, his private sanctuary when he needed to escape his role as emperor and his family's machinations?
- 2 Two of Nero's outstanding passions—his love of Greece and his love of athletics—must have come from somewhere, although both are un-Roman. The Romans thought Greece was effete and athletics for its own sake a waste of time. Why do you think Nero was drawn to both? Could it have been from his early tutors, who were Greek? Was it his way of carving out his own identity?
- 3 As part of his Greek mania, Nero seemed obsessed by the story of Troy. He composed an epic about it, making Paris the hero. Paris was banished from Troy as a child because of a prophecy; as an adult, he was mocked for fighting with arrows from a distance rather than close with swords like traditional epic heroes. Did Nero identify with Paris because Paris did not follow the pattern of epic heroes and was an outsider?
- 4 Nero was born the same time of year as the Saturnalia. It seemed to be his special holiday, where rules were suspended and people went about in disguise. He showed an early attraction for costumes, change of identity, and pageantry, and for license to break rules. What do you think inspired this behavior?
- 5 At times, Nero seemed to be several people, and he was aware of this when he said there was the daylight, dutiful Augustan Nero, the artist Nero, and the dark Nero that did dark deeds. He thought of them as separate entities rather than facets of the same person. Was this his way to avoid admitting the dark Nero was as much a part of himself as the other ones?
- 6 One historian says the history of Nero's reign was an attempt 'to break boundaries.' In what ways did he do this, in his personal and political life?
- 7 To be an emperor was to have supreme power over many things, but that in itself precluded anyone being truly honest with Nero. It also meant that there could be no true competition because no one could beat the emperor. How did this affect his deep need to measure himself against others as an artist or an athlete?



# READER'S GUIDE *continued*

*Augustus, a canny politician and great statesman, was unable to solve the basic dilemma of disguising the empire as a republic. It was part of Roman civic pride that they had banished kings—Julius Caesar was assassinated for behaving like a king—but, in truth, the republic was not structured to govern what was now an empire.*

*So the fiction had to be maintained that the emperor was really just the first citizen. That meant that they could not openly have a dynasty, and there was no clear line of succession—hence, every man was for himself in securing the throne. In an atmosphere like that, there were no holds-barred in battling for supremacy. So ruthless was this process that by the death of Nero, there were no male descendants of Augustus left alive, and the entire dynasty ended.*

- 8 What if Nero had refused to compete for the crown? Could he have had a quiet life and pursued his art in peace? Later in life, he expressed the idea that he could support himself by his art if he were deposed. Was this at all realistic? Or just another of his romantic dreams?
- 9 Two living emperors (Caligula and Claudius) appear in this book, and the earlier ones are a constant psychological presence. How was Nero affected by being aware from an early age of both his lineage and the expectation to live up to it?
- 10 Nero's descent from Augustus meant that he was always in a spotlight but at the same time obscure, as there were many other descendants of Augustus. In the book, Nero says, "I was, as always, solitary and singled out." What did he do in response to this?
- 11 There were rumors that Nero and his mother had an incestuous relationship, instigated by her as a means of controlling him. Of all the familial incests, mother-son is the rarest. But it is the easiest to conceal because mothers normally lavish affection on their children, including physical affection. In what ways do you see his mother's seductive behavior affecting him in the novel?
- 12 How would you sum up Nero's feelings toward his mother? Was the matricide at all justified? On what level? Political or psychological?
- 13 Did Nero have any choice to go against his mother's plans to murder Claudius so he could become emperor? What if he had refused?
- 14 Murder abounded in Nero's family, but, in the novel, Nero wants to think he is different. At the same time, he fears he isn't. Is there such a thing as inheriting 'the blood of murderers'?
- 15 There were four important women in Nero's life: his mother; his mother; his first love, Acte; his first wife, Octavie; and his second wife, Poppaea. With the exception of Octavia, with whom his marriage was arranged, the others were all older than he was and very strong characters. He was madly in love with Acte and Poppaea. Was he seeking a mother figure/surrogate in the women he loved—older, beautiful, and strong-willed?
- 16 Nero was a romantic about marriage and exotic adventure. In what ways was this his undoing?
- 17 Nero was only sixteen when he became emperor and held supreme power in many spheres. At an age when people today are just eligible to drive and too young to serve in the military, Nero commanded the entire Roman army and empire. Considering this, how well did he perform?



A Conversation With *New York Times* Bestselling Author

# MARGARET GEORGE

On What Rome's Bad Boy Emperor Nero Was Really Like



AUTHOR PHOTO © Alison Kaufman

**NERO IS USUALLY THOUGHT OF AS A TYRANT. WHAT IN YOUR RESEARCH ALERTED YOU TO THE IDEA THAT HE MIGHT NOT BE THE BAD BOY HISTORY REMEMBERS?**

If you look at what he actually did and blow away the fog of hostility around his reputation, you find that not only did he do a lot of worthy things, but that the interpretation of what he did can vary. That is not to say he wasn't guilty of some high-profile political murders, but they weren't out of context in ancient Rome in the imperial family. Where his reputation as a tyrant came from is a big question, since his executions were only of people who threatened his throne or tried to assassinate him, so his response was pretty normal. The common people loved him, but they didn't write his history, unfortunately. His enemies did.

## IF YOU HAD TO PICK SOMEONE FROM NERO'S REIGN TO HAVE LUNCH WITH, WHO WOULD IT BE?

Probably Agrippina the Younger, a remarkable, clever, ruthless woman who was sister to an emperor (Caligula), wife to another (Claudius), and mother of another (Nero.) But I would watch what I ate as she was a notorious poisoner!

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## I NOTICED YOU WEAR A REAL ANCIENT ROMAN WEDDING RING. YOU'VE WRITTEN ABOUT DIVERSE HISTORICAL FIGURES, INCLUDING HELEN OF TROY, CLEOPATRA, AND MARY MAGDALENE. DO YOU EMBRACE EACH RESEARCH PERIOD THIS THOROUGHLY, OR DOES THE ROMAN EMPIRE HOLD A SPECIAL PLACE IN YOUR HEART?

The Roman Empire does have a special attraction for me. It is the one period that feels most like ours because we have inherited so much from it. But at the same time, they are strikingly different in many ways. One can still wear Roman jewelry; Roman-style gowns for women are still in fashion (although not togas for men, except at a fraternity party); we still have a Senate; and Washington, D.C., is full of Roman-style public buildings. (One historian said if you want to see what ancient Rome looked like, go to Washington, D.C. rather than Rome itself.) The Roman love of luxury has crept into our puritanical lives—they would feel right at home in Jacuzzis, spas, athletic clubs, and our giant arenas for football games. At the same time, they had slaves, brutal gladiatorial games, a professional army with non-professional commanders in the top ranks, and fines for unmarried men. So it is that mix of the familiar and the exotic that pulls me to ancient Rome and makes me want to walk its streets. It is so near and yet so far, a tantalizing mix.

## YOU HAD THE IDEA TO WRITE ABOUT NERO THIRTY YEARS AGO. WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG TO BRING THE BOOK TO FRUITION?

Nero was a hard sell! When I started my project, the feelings about Nero as a bad guy were at a high. I think people were scared of him! All they knew was the caricature of the fiddling madman. But I persisted, and times changed. Several major museum exhibitions (in Rome and in Trier, Germany) and new publications are reevaluating him and his reign. He is making a comeback that should earn him the title of "The Comeback Kid."

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## WHY DO YOU THINK THERE HAS BEEN SUCH A RESURGENCE OF INTEREST?

The wave of gender studies and studies of common people in society opened the door to looking at historical events from a different perspective. Suddenly, the lighting on Nero shifted and highlighted things that had been downplayed or overlooked—his revolutionary architectural designs, his urban safety planning for Rome, the splendor of the coin designs (artistically, the finest Rome ever produced), his popularity with the masses. In 2016, there was a huge exhibit in Trier, Germany, "Nero: Emperor, Artist and Tyrant." How nice that 'tyrant' was last in the list for a change. An essay in the 7 lb. catalogue—that's a lot of Nero!—was titled "Nero: A Reconsideration." In 2011, there was, likewise, a major Nero exhibit in Rome that enjoyed great success and stressed him as "Nero: Superstar." He's having his long-overdue Moment. In his birthplace of Antium, the town fathers proudly erected a statue of their native son in 2010, and posted a welcoming sign at the city limits proclaiming: ANZIO—the City of Nero. This reflects the general change of attitude toward Nero lately.

## IN THE BOOK, NERO IS A VICTIM OF A POLITICAL SMEAR CAMPAIGN—ANONYMOUS LIES, MISQUOTING, NAME-CALLING, ETC. HOW DOES THE FALSE GOSSIP REVEAL THE TIME NERO LIVED IN?

Character assassination attacks have changed very little since they were first invented, probably about the time of the first politician! Historians used to either believe these assassination attacks without scrutiny (Caligula made his horse a consul), or dismiss them as fluff and not worth considering (Tiberius kept boy toys on Capri and had a collection of pornographic manuscripts). Now they study them as revealing the society that generates them. So, in ancient Rome, the attacks were on someone's lineage, dignity, sexual practices, and mental stability. The last two are still popular today.

## ARE YOU LIKE NERO IN ANY WAY?

Nero found 'real life' to be stifling and boring and needed to escape into the world of art and fantasy. I have felt the same way, although not to that extreme. A lot of writers do. I think Erica Jong once wrote something to the effect that when she was out doing something, she wanted it to be over so she could rush home and write about it. We are peculiar that way. The fact that Nero felt that way proves to me that he was a true artist, because normally an emperor wouldn't find real life boring, to say the least.

## IF NERO COULD READ THE BOOK, WHAT WOULD HE THINK OF IT?

I like to think that he would applaud it as giving him his due respect as an artist and also understanding that he endured many psychological shocks in his childhood that left deep marks on him. He also was forced to take the reins of the empire at too young an age and was in over his head. I hope Nero would feel that I captured all of that with empathy and understanding.

## HOW DID GROWING UP ALL OVER THE WORLD—ISRAEL, GERMANY, AND TAIWAN—INFORM AND INSPIRE YOUR WRITING?

Israel had the most effect on me because I was at the age when I really started writing, ages seven, eight, and nine. I was surrounded by history and saw how real it was and how legendary people left traces behind. I could see Herod's palace in Jerusalem and went to school in Jaffa (ancient Joppa) where Jonah set sail, St. Peter performed miracles, and the cedar beams for Solomon's temple were brought down from Lebanon. I could see it all in my own mind with a child's vivid imagination. That legacy has never left me.

## AS A WRITER KNOWN FOR HER METICULOUS RESEARCH, WHAT DETAILS, IF ANY, DO YOU INVENT?

There is no such thing as a transcript of every word and action a character took, even today. Even less for people who lived hundreds of years ago. Often small details survive in the record when major events are fuzzy. These can add realism to a story; for example, that Nero had a special drink made of melted and boiled snow. But I have to fill in gaps, although I try never to go against a known fact, and if I do, to note it in the author's afterword.

I don't have a research assistant: as laborious as it is to do it all myself, often just some little nugget I saw in the research will trigger the idea for a scene. It might be something so small a research assistant wouldn't think it worthwhile to note. For example, I remembered reading that Nero's baths were notorious for their high temperature, which allowed me to have a scene where he specifies that's what he wants when he's having them built.



## YOU'VE CALLED NERO "THE FIRST MASS MARKET POP STAR"—EXPLAIN.

He's also been called "the Elvis of the ancient world." Elvis said "I want to entertain people. That's my whole life—to my last breath." (Which turned out to be literally true in Nero's case.) Nero was also a true artist and performer who increasingly got most of his personal satisfaction out of performing—music and drama—and entering public competitions, shocking as that was for an emperor. The patricians and senators hated it, but the common people loved it. He went on an 18-month "concert tour" in Greece, accompanied by an entourage of groupies, musicians, professional cheerers and clappers, and masters of ceremonies for his sold-out performances. Unlike Elvis, he didn't need jumpsuits, as the costume requirements for citharode (a type of lyre) players and drama enactments were traditional and strictly enforced.

## CAN YOU GIVE US ANY TEASERS FOR THE NEXT BOOK?

The next book will take us through the last years of Nero's tragically short life (he died at thirty), including the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64, the revolutionary rebuilding of Rome, the Piso conspiracy (involving the philosopher Seneca and the poet Lucan), the diplomatic triumph of peace with Parthia and a spectacular celebration in Rome, the artistic tour of Greece, and, finally, the revolt of the legions and the swift collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, of which Nero was the last emperor. With him, the ruling family founded by Julius Caesar came to an end, but it has never been surpassed for drama and achievement.





Gold ring with carnelian intaglio portrait of Nero. It was discovered in the south Caucasus and thought to be a diplomatic gift to the Armenian dynasty from the imperial court at Rome.

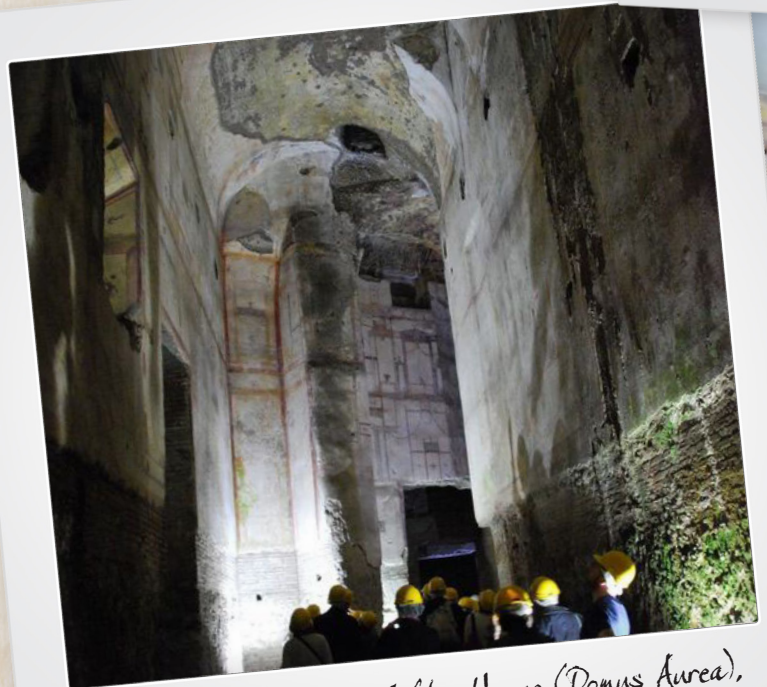


This statue of the young Nero in military garb was found in Britain and is now in the British Museum.

The Ara Pacis (altar of peace), erected by Augustus to celebrate the end of the civil wars, was painstakingly reassembled from sunken pieces and installed in its own museum in 1938. Made of white marble with exquisite carved images.



Bust of the young Nero, about the time the teenager became emperor. (54-58 AD)



The interior of Nero's Golden House (Domus Aurea), with 35 ft. high ceilings. The marble and gems have been removed, but the frescoes remain.





Artist's conception of the grounds of Nero's famous lost Golden House. The artificial lake was filled in by his successor, and the Colosseum built where the lake had been.



Garden frescoes from Livia's villa (30-20 B.C.) that depict the plants so accurately, we can identify the species. Amazingly preserved!



Frescoes from the lost "Domus Transitoria" that was destroyed in the fire of 64 AD. These were of a fashionable, new style that featured white as a background and delicate figures and motifs in red.



The underground ruins of Nero's fantastic Golden House are open to the public with archaeological guides and hard hats. Margaret (front center) visited it in 2016.



This obelisk now at St. Peter's, once stood in Nero's private race track near where the Vatican now is.