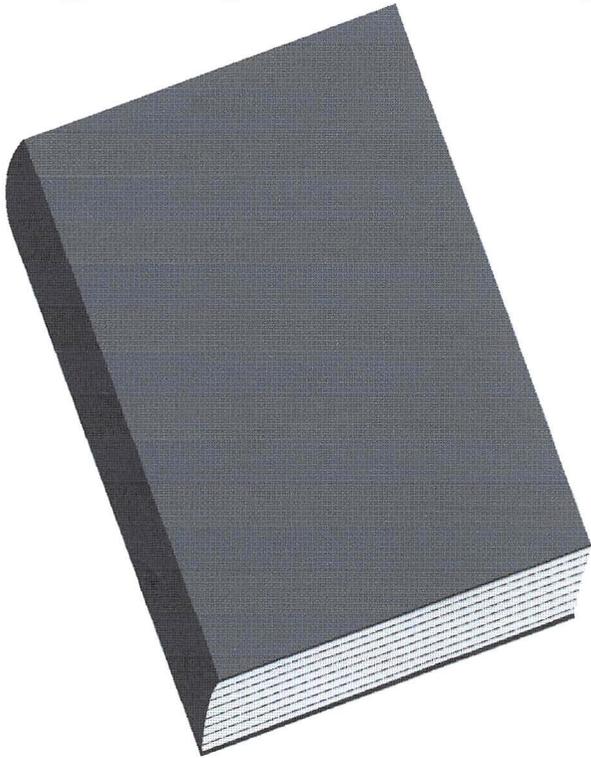


Blood flowing, hordes roaring

Tom Palaima agrees that people's fascination with watching violence against others doesn't change



The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at Roman Games

By Garrett G. Fagan
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Readers who are themselves lured to Garrett Fagan's *The Lure of the Arena* for graphic descriptions of violent acts will not be disappointed. Given the universal questions about human nature and human societies that Fagan poses in trying to explain the phenomenon of the Roman amphitheatre, they will be rewarded with catalogues, drawn from many societies and periods of human history, designed to prove that "the Romans were by no means alone in finding the sight of people and animals tormented and killed both intriguing and appealing". Cultures closer to our own in time

have been more creative in devising forms of violence for their men, women and children, poor and simple-minded or wealthy and well educated, to witness and enjoy together.

Fagan devotes a long chapter, judiciously illustrated with woodcuts of 16th- and 18th-century public executions, to sampling the "vast corpus of comparative evidence for violence staged before spectators". Crucifixion, castration, stoning, clubbing, flaying, burning, boiling alive in oil, decapitation, burial alive, drawing and quartering, branding, flogging and other kinds of mutilation cannot match being "braided" on a wheel for gruesome cruelty.

Practised in France until 1787 and in Germany into the 1840s, this manner of execution pulverised the prisoner's limbs, threaded his body through the spokes of a wheel, and then set it on a pole for public viewing. An

eyewitness describes the victim eventually as "a sort of huge screaming puppet, writhing in rivulets of blood, a puppet with four tentacles, like a sea monster of raw, slimy and shapeless flesh, mixed with splinters of smashed bones". This makes Martial's description of the Sicilian bandit Laureolus, who was ripped apart by a bear in the arena so that "in his body there was no body", seem uninspired.

This is what large crowds of human beings like to watch. The question has always been – why?

Fagan first takes us through "the experience of watching at the Roman arena" on its own cultural and historical terms. People from all levels of society and from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds travelled long distances and sometimes devoted days to sitting in amphitheatres that held up to 44,000 spectators in North Africa, and 54,760 at Rome in the Colosseum.

The capacity of Romans to take in violence is partly explained by their day-to-day exposure to violent acts, human cruelty, pain and suffering and death, and the fact that their infant mortality was 30 per cent. Slaves, viewed literally as living dead or "a kind of tool with a voice", were routinely brutally punished. A paterfamilias could use extreme violence on wayward children. Roman soldiers learned an ideology of dominance through violence during their service. The lives of ordinary Romans thus "inured the Roman psyche to accept high levels of violence as a form of entertaining spectacle".

Of course, even emperors differed in their own tastes when it came to attending or sponsoring games. Tiberius put on very few spectacles. Caligula used them as outlets for his cruelty. And Claudius showed bad form, we are told, by staying through the midday executions.

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Within the arena, spectators felt the order imposed by imperial power. They literally congregated and identified with peers in the carefully organised seating sections of the amphitheatres – no one had to learn their place. At times, they made collective decisions on life or death.

Besides "crowd dynamics", Fagan argues that "satiation of prejudice, excitement at sporting events, and the attraction of violence as entertainment" hold "explanatory promise". He drives the point home by imagining a "Spectacle of Justice" involving US death-row prisoners fighting as gladiators in Penn State University's 110,000-seat football stadium. He bets all seats would be filled. Fagan clearly never risks a losing bet.

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