



The Legend of Valentine: An Ancient Historical Love Story

Sheldon Collins

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A Roman hero experiences love, deception, and celebration in the suspenseful historical novel The Legend of Valentine.

In Sheldon Collins's gripping historical novel *The Legend of Valentine*, a young soldier defends country and pursues love in a time of Roman upheaval.

This is a creative novel about the figure at the heart of St. Valentine's Day. In the third century, Roman soldier Valentine Romanus fights for his country with a group of loyal soldiers, battling foreign foes and internal adversaries. If he hopes to reunite with his childhood sweetheart, Agatha, he has to overcome injury and betrayal. As a hero, he is imposing—a soldier whose bravery, mental conviction, and belief in love sustains him. His battlefield confidence and charm make him both admired by strangers and despised by his military peers.

The book's high-energy combat scenes, which feature shining armor, clashing swords, and flying arrows, sometimes make characters seem superhuman, though, as with a jump from a fast-moving horse into a fiery carriage to save an empress. Still, brash Valentine deepens into an intellectual and spiritual man as the story unfolds. And the ancient world circa 269 CE is captured with details that extend from the land's "towering, snowcapped Alps" to stark scenes in which marching soldiers hold their spears "ready for battle." Agatha's country house is a place of calm and respite "nestled between a gentle hill and a secluded grove of ancient oak trees"—a place whose beauty exists in stark contrast to the deeds of her father, the emperor's executioner. Further, the political and religious concerns of the time are explored from various viewpoints, as men discuss their loyalty to Rome and its gods.

Valentine's growth stems from introspection and his exchanges with others. His Christianity grows from ambivalence to acceptance to refined appreciation. Agatha is a steadier figure throughout, exuding loyalty and perseverance in her devotion to her family and faith. She also experiences setbacks, as with her loss of sight beginning in her teenage years. Secretive devotion to Christianity is evoked in the consistent image of a fish, a "quiet symbol of their Christian faith."

The novel moves apace with its separate, intriguing storylines and characters: In addition to Valentine's story, it features a power struggle between Emperor Gallienus and General Claudius; elsewhere, Senator Junius's political ambitions clash with those of his senate peers and the emperor's generals; and Serena, the unhappy wife of a Roman magistrate, breeds trouble through seduction. However, so many characters are introduced early in the book that people's allegiances are difficult to track at first. In time, the storylines intersect via Valentine himself, leading to a final plot twist that befits the preceding spirited adventure and that exceeds expectations, resulting in final satisfaction.

The Legend of Valentine is an entertaining historical novel about action, love, and what it means to have faith.

KATY KEFFER (January 28, 2025)

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