



## Saylor, Steven (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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Now best known for his highly successful mystery novels set in ancient Rome, Steven Saylor began his writing career by publishing erotica under the pen-name Aaron Travis.

Steven Saylor grew up in the heart of Texas. He was born in the Gulf coast city of Port Lavaca on March 23, 1956, but his parents divorced when he was a small boy, and his mother moved their three children to Dallas, where she attended secretarial school. Upon completing the course she settled her family in the small town of Goldthwaite in the hill country, where her mother lived.

The family was poor, but Saylor recalls that his mother was a resourceful manager. She also valued education and encouraged her children to strive for academic success.

While life in a small country town may have its idyllic moments, it can also present an awkward situation for those who diverge from the local norm. Saylor recognized at an early age that he was one who did.

When he was about ten, he read a story entitled "I Married a Homosexual" in his mother's copy of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. He realized that he was gay but had a hard time finding information about homosexuality. Eventually he was able to buy some porn paperbacks in a neighboring town, and he found them more helpful than the articles offered by encyclopedias or the cruel and insulting image of gay men and lesbians presented in the popular *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* (1969) by David R. Reuben.

After high school Saylor enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, where he majored in history, with an emphasis on Rome. An excellent student, he graduated with high honors in 1978.

Free from the social constraints of small-town life, Saylor was able to explore his sexuality in Austin. He socialized with other gay men and frequented gay bars (of which the city boasted three at the time). During his freshman year he met and fell in love with fellow student Richard Solomon. The couple has been together ever since. They officially registered as domestic partners in San Francisco in 1991.

Saylor came out to his older brother when he was nineteen. Other family members, including his sister and a cousin with a gay son, were also aware and accepting of his sexual orientation. He hesitated to confide in his mother, who had stated that homosexuality was "a sin against God" and that "finding it out about a child would 'kill' a parent."

Prompted by a letter in which his mother complained that he did not "want to share even a little of [his] life" with her, Saylor, then twenty-three, revealed his sexual orientation and also told her that he had been writing for gay magazines.

Saylor's mother assured him that she still loved him although his sexuality perplexed her. She declined to



Steven Saylor (front) posing with Roman legionnaires in Kensington High Street, London in 1999. Image courtesy Steven Saylor, [www.stevensaylor.com](http://www.stevensaylor.com).

read his writings. She continued to welcome Solomon to her home, as she always had. Saylor stated, "My mother could accommodate, even if she could not accept."

Saylor's first published writings included articles and book reviews for gay magazines. In the early 1980s, following a move to San Francisco, he also became an editor, working at the magazine *Drummer*, a gay S/M journal.

Saylor's first fiction was erotica written under the pen-name Aaron Travis. His first Travis story was published in 1979. He explained in a 2004 interview that he wrote erotic fiction when he was in his twenties because that was where he found his muse, but he also emphasized the seriousness with which he undertook the task, stating, "I probably did more actual rewriting on those stories than anything I've done since, because for me, writing erotic fiction is like writing a piece of music, because if one note is wrong, you lose [the audience]." He added that "writing erotica was actually wonderful training for just being able to write what I am seeing and thinking"--both conveying the psychological states of his characters and describing the actions and relationships of their bodies.

The Travis stories and novels are characterized by an unusual immediacy and intensity. While they are generally set in the world of leather culture and feature S/M activity, the obsessiveness of his characters is delineated by means of sharp psychological insight, which serves to heighten the eroticism.

Saylor commented on the evolution that he sees in his Aaron Travis writings. He called the earlier works "much meaner" with "a lot of very sadistic stories." By contrast, he considered a later work, "Getting Timenchenko" (which is set in his hometown), "a kind of sexual healing," adding, "I worked out all kinds of conflicts, things about my sexuality."

The Aaron Travis books went out of print, but due to a resurgence of interest, several have been reissued, and many of the Aaron Travis stories are included in recent anthologies.

Saylor put his study of history to good use when he wrote the mystery novel *Roman Blood* (1991), a tale dealing with Cicero's murder trials. He saw the book as "a literary novel" and was surprised when his editor asked for a sequel to continue the series.

Fortunately for mystery fans, Saylor took up the challenge, which, he said, presented "a fantastic chance to tell [about] what, to me, remains the most interesting period of human history, which is the end of the Roman republic."

Saylor has taken Gordianus, his detective--or "finder" in the terminology of the novels--through ten adventures. Critics have praised him for his "carefully researched stories" and "twisty fair-play plotting" as well as his uncanny sense of time and place that permits him to bring the long-ago and far-away vividly to life.

In his Gordianus novels (known collectively as the Roma sub Rosa series) Saylor deftly weaves epochal events of Roman history together with the evolving story of the finder and his family. His writing has earned him an audience both devoted and highly engaged. Saylor reports that his readers have expressed very clear opinions (sometimes contradictory) about their ideas for the future of Gordianus's family and their life in the business of crime detection.

The Gordianus novels have earned numerous awards, including Lambda Literary Awards, the Crime Writers of America Ellis Peters Historical Dagger Award, the Herodotus Award from the Historical Mystery Appreciation Society, and the Hammett Award of the International Association of Crime Writers.

In addition to the Roma sub Rosa series Saylor has written two stand-alone mystery novels, both of which bring him back to Texas.

In *A Twist at the End: A Novel of O. Henry* (2000), Saylor offers a potential solution to a series of murders that plagued Austin in the 1880s when the young William Sydney Porter, who would go on to fame with his pseudonymous O. Henry stories, was still just an aspiring young writer. As he does in the Gordianus books, Saylor skillfully evokes the place and society of the period. His research, documented in an endnote, was clearly meticulous, but he allowed himself one playful flight of whimsy: in a list of best-selling authors of the day he included "Aaron Warren Travis," lending his middle name to his persona as a writer of erotica.

*Have You Seen Dawn?* (2003) is set in a town very much like Goldthwaite and includes a character closely based on his beloved grandmother. Saylor stated that writing the novel brought him particular joy "because that got me further into my own roots."

Saylor's current project is *Roma*, scheduled for publication in 2005, which he calls "my big Micheneresque panoramic saga of the origins of Rome." He hopes to follow it up with histories of the city through the Empire, the medieval and renaissance periods, and "up to Fellini."

Saylor has become a California resident, living and working in Berkeley. His partner Solomon is a member of the board of directors of the Folsom Street Events in San Francisco, an organization that "promotes diversity within the leather/alternative lifestyle" community and raises money for glbtq charities. The couple also maintains a home in Austin and returns there several times a year.

Asked in a 2003 interview what particularly suited him to being a mystery writer, Saylor replied, "There's a quote from Cicero: 'Nature has planted in our minds an insatiable longing to see the truth.' That applies very much to Gordianus, my sleuth, and to me, too, which I suppose explains my addiction to both writing and reading mystery fiction: a deep longing to see the truth uncovered. We live in a world so thick with lies--every gay person knows this from very early in life--that it's a great relief to escape into a book in which the truth actually matters."

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