

Who needs Roman imperial fantasies?

After watching *Gladiator II*, I turned elsewhere for a more joyful model of masculinity.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#)

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Paul Mescal as Lucius in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator II* (Aidan Monaghan / Paramount Pictures)

Ridley Scott's movies are often splashy epics about near impossible feats undertaken by flawed but honorable and charismatic men. His subjects are both historical heroes (*Napoleon*, 2023; *Robin Hood*, 2010) and ordinary men who rise to extraordinary circumstances (*White Squall*, 1996; *Black Hawk Down*, 2001; *The*

Martian, 2015). He might be forgiven, then, for basically reworking the story from his first *Gladiator* movie (2000) with a few variations and new characters in *Gladiator II*. In the first movie, he hit on a winning formula that showcased his favorite preoccupations in a decidedly Roman key: decadent despots pitted against noble republicans, ostentatious violence, self-sacrifice in the name of greater ideals. Plus, the subject matter lends itself to epic special effects, like a shark-infested naval battle in a flooded Colosseum.

The sequel follows many of the same plot points as the original: a mysterious young fighter, Lucius (Paul Mescal), is sold into slavery from the outskirts of the Roman Empire and trains as a gladiator with the hope of winning his freedom. Lucius carries a burning grudge toward Roman general Acacius (Pedro Pascal), who led the Roman army that destroyed Lucius's home and killed his wife. Acacius, on the other hand, has grown weary of the endless war he is forced to wage at the command of Rome's corrupt and decadent twin emperors. He also happens to be married to Lucilla (Connie Nielsen), the heroine of the first film, and they are plotting with a small group of senators to overthrow the emperors by force and restore the Republic. When Lucius shows up in the Colosseum, questions about his true identity throw these power struggles into chaos, leading to an ultimate showdown between tyranny and true heroism.

In 2023, there was a TikTok trend in which women asked their husbands and boyfriends how often they thought about the Roman Empire. The women were shocked by the answers they received: "Not that often, only once every week or two," "At least once a day," "There's so much to think about." Watching *Gladiator II*, which surely will add fuel to the smoldering embers in the hearts of many men, reminded me how many contradictions sit at the heart of most popular fantasies about imperial Rome.

In 2000, *Gladiator* felt like a fun, inspiring hero's tale with a gloss of parable about the need to safeguard republican values from power-hungry overreach. *Gladiator II* is also about a noble, self-sacrificing man who is willing to take up arms against despotic rule. Scott works so hard to link the two stories through bloodlines and family dramas, though, that we end up rooting for a dynasty, which flies in the face of republican virtues. The gladiator plotline allows Scott to skirt the problem of Roman slavery: through combat these slaves can earn their freedom, suggesting that Roman slavery couldn't have been that bad, at least not for the right kind of heroic man.

Macrinus, Lucius's slave master (Denzel Washington), is a former slave who won his own freedom. Instead of embracing the lessons of republican nobility, however, he doubles down on a philosophy of absolute power. Technically he's a villain, so we aren't supposed to agree with this philosophy, but it is hard not to root for him since he is by far the most charismatic character in the film. Even when we cheer for Lucius, the rightful hero, his professed willingness to spill blood in the name of freedom doesn't sound quite as inspiring in a post-January 6 moment. Watching *Gladiator II*, it is hard not to be a little suspicious about exactly what we are longing for in our Roman fantasies.

Maybe the better solution is to imagine what it would mean to live without a need for imperial fantasies in the first place. For this, I might recommend the wondrous and astonishingly silly sitcom *Detroiters* (2017–2018, now streaming on Netflix).

Created by real-life friends Tim Robinson and Sam Richardson, the show follows the follies and foibles of best friends and small-time ad executives in Detroit as they pitch local clients like Husky Boys clothing, Smith's Baby and Teen Kid Furniture, and Roz Chunks "The Mom Lawyer." Tim Cramblin and Sam Duvet are bit players who dream of landing a big client like Chrysler or Little Caesars. They are, in many ways, living the kind of lives that presumably drive ordinary men to fantasize about Roman legionnaires and the lost possibilities of valor and meaning worth dying for. In most shows about middle-class men, they would be the brunt of the joke—the sad-dad, small-man type snatching the crumbs of joy from the table of life but never serving the banquet.

There is plenty of middle-class ennui in the show: the small humiliations of corporate life, the sense that late capitalism is stacked against ordinary people, the psychic struggles with hypermasculine fathers. But Tim and Sam exude joy and happiness, which flow out of their goofy, profound, abundant friendship with each other. The beats of the show are often ridiculous and heavily laced with a kind of stupidity especially beloved of millennial and Gen Z audiences, but their love of each other is infectious and soul-expanding.

In an early episode, one of their clients (who probably thinks about the Roman Empire a lot) announces that he is off to Dubai for a week of sand surfing because "you can't let making a living prevent you from making a life." Gobsmacked at this cliché, Tim and Sam buy a motorcycle and play hooky all week to "ride their hog." By the end of the week, though, they are saddle sore, bored, and slightly terrified of dying in a crash. "If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?" they

ask each other, while fantasizing about the perfect life. “Work with you at Cramblin Duvet Advertising,” they both answer without hesitation. Who needs a Roman fantasy when you have a best friend?