



Author Q & A



About the Author . . . Randy Singer is a critically acclaimed, award-winning author and veteran trial attorney. He has penned more than 12 legal thrillers and was a finalist with John Grisham and Michael Connelly for the inaugural Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction sponsored by the University of Alabama School of Law and the *ABA Journal*. Randy runs his own law practice and has been named, through the peer review process of *Super Lawyers* magazine, as one of the top 100 lawyers in Virginia. In addition to his law practice and writing, Randy serves as teaching pastor for Trinity Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a seven-year-old church that has grown to over 700 in attendance. He calls it his “Jekyll and Hyde thing”—part lawyer, part pastor. He also teaches classes in civil litigation at Regent Law School and serves on the Board of Visitors there. He and his wife, Rhonda, live in Virginia Beach. They have two grown children. Visit his website at www.randysinger.net.

1. As a novelist, pastor, and trial attorney, you seem uniquely qualified to craft this story. Do you feel that you were meant to write this novel, *The Advocate*?

It does feel like I was born to write this book—that everything else has just been practice. I know that I’m more excited about this book than any other I’ve done. And it took longer—nearly five years from concept to completion.

Unlike my previous books, *The Advocate* is historical fiction. It’s focused on the two greatest trials in the history of the world: the trial of Jesus (which has been written about extensively) and the trial of Paul in front of Nero, which we know next to nothing about. Both changed the lives of all those associated with them as well as the trajectory of history.

So yes, it does feel like this story, more than any other, brought together my roles as storyteller, pastor, and trial attorney. It also tapped into my experience as a history teacher before I went to law school. Until I started writing *The Advocate*, I had forgotten how much I loved studying this period of history.

2. How does *The Advocate* relate to the gospel message?

In two ways. First, *The Advocate* is the story of a man who played a central role in both the trial of Jesus and the trial of Paul in front of Nero. As you read the story, you are literally face-to-face with the two greatest proponents of the Christian faith in the midst of their greatest trials. There is no middle ground. You are forced to choose.

Second, I believe the strongest evidence for the authenticity of the Christian faith is the faith and courage of the first-century Christians. They are the ones who literally bet their lives on the reality of the Resurrection. They had seen the risen Christ and had been totally transformed by the Spirit. Their courage, humility, strength, and resolve cannot be explained away apart from the supernatural.



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The day after I called my publisher with the idea for this book, I had dinner with a friend. Not knowing anything about this book, he was telling me how he had rejected the Christian faith his entire life until he started studying the earliest Christians and asked himself some simple questions. Why would they pledge their lives to a cause they knew to be a fraud? If they hadn't actually seen Christ come back from the dead, why would claim they did? Where did they find the courage to confront the kingdoms of their day with the claims of the Kingdom of Christ? Those questions, and his search for answers, led him to put his faith in Christ. I knew after that dinner conversation that God had called me to write this book and bring this story to life.

3. ***This book is obviously a departure from your normal fare of writing contemporary legal thrillers. What elements of a typical Randy Singer novel are present in *The Advocate*? Do you plan on writing more historical novels like this or returning to legal thrillers?***

The Advocate is a unique blend of legal thriller and historical fiction. The protagonist is one of Rome's greatest lawyers and is involved in the first-century trials that determined the fate of the empire. The stakes are even higher and the intrigue greater than in modern courtrooms.

Whether I'm writing a legal thriller or a historical piece like this one, my goal is that each of my books will feature realistic and compelling characters, intricate plots with lots of surprises, and a story line that entertains the reader while causing him or her to think about the bigger issues in life. My hope is that this book will have the authentic "feel" of a Randy Singer novel, just in a different place and time. Only the readers can say whether I've accomplished that.

I do plan on writing legal thrillers again, but I've also got a sequel to *The Advocate* in mind. I'd like to see how this book is received before I make any decisions.

4. ***Who is the advocate, your titular character—the man who defended the world's greatest missionary in front of the world's cruelest tyrant?***

The advocate is Theophilus, the man to whom Luke addressed the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. My premise is that he was Paul's advocate, chosen to plead Paul's case in front of Nero, the most despised ruler in the history of Rome (and that's saying a lot). Theophilus accepted the assignment because he had previously served as Pilate's *assessore*, or law clerk, and was there for the trial of Jesus. The crucifixion of an innocent Jewish Rabbi, and the events that followed, changed Theophilus in profound ways. Thirty years later, he sought redemption for his role in the trial of Christ by defending the Rabbi's most strident disciple.



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5. *In your novel, you suggest that the books of Luke and Acts were written as evidentiary briefs for Theophilus in defense of Paul. Can you help us understand this?*

As a novelist, I always wondered why the book of Acts ended with Paul imprisoned in Rome, waiting for his trial in front of the infamous Nero. Luke is a great storyteller, but it seemed like a strange way to end a great story—right at the climax. Combine this with the fact that Luke spends five chapters at the end of Acts telling about the minute details of Paul’s trials that preceded his appeal to Caesar. And finally there is that intriguing hint in the salutation of the two books, where Luke tells the “most excellent Theophilus” that he has written this account so that Theophilus will “know the certainty of the things you have been [told]” (Luke 1:4).

When you put all those things together, it seems to me that these two books were written to assist Theophilus, as Paul’s court-appointed advocate for his trial in front of Nero, to understand Paul’s story and better defend him. Perhaps Theophilus visited Paul when he was under house arrest and heard an earful from Paul and his companion Luke about this Nazarene named Jesus and the reasons for Paul’s arrest. Perhaps Theophilus, recognizing that Luke was a great historian and storyteller, urged the doctor to write the whole thing down in a form that could be submitted as evidence at the trial. In Roman courts, written submissions were just as valued as oral testimony. And when I read the books of Luke and Acts with this thesis in mind, I realize just how much they read like a legal brief—arguing the case that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah (because Judaism was still legal in the Empire) and that both he and Paul had been prosecuted based on trumped-up charges of sedition.

6. *The trial of Jesus Christ has been studied and dissected for centuries. What made you want to examine the trial of the apostle Paul? What do you most want to share about this trial?*

I would love to know what happened at the trial of Paul. He was the world’s greatest missionary, a brilliant advocate in his own defense who was not afraid to call even kings and rulers to repentance. And sitting on the throne judging him was Nero, the cruelest, most depraved and self-possessed tyrant the world had ever seen. Paul was accused of starting a new religion and of sedition against Rome. What did Paul say when he testified? What would I say as an advocate if I were the one defending him? How did the haughty Nero react? We know from Acts 26 that when Paul was brought to trial before Agrippa, he tried to convert the Roman king. Did he do the same with Nero? Is this trial part of the reason that Nero hated Christians so much?

You would think that Paul would have no chance of winning. But you would be wrong. In 2 Timothy, Paul said that the message was fully proclaimed at his trial so that the Gentiles might hear it. And yet miraculously, he was “delivered from the lion’s mouth.” The phrase “the lion” was a common way of



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referring to Caesar. How could this be? How could Paul and his advocate possibly convince the notorious Nero that Paul was an innocent man? Those are the questions I wanted to explore in this book.

7. *The concept of Christian martyrdom comes up in this novel. How did the deaths of these early Christians set the stage for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire?*

Romans were fascinated with death. They watched brave gladiators die and honored them for their courage. They experimented with the mechanics of death, thinking up new and horrific ways to kill condemned prisoners or captives of war. They made a spectacle of death, perfecting things like crucifixion.

But they had never seen men and women die like the Christians. Yes, they had seen courage in the face of death—something the Christians exhibited along with the noblest gladiators. But they had never seen such commitment to a cause, such peace in the face of torture, such grace and forgiveness for those whom the Christians should have been cursing.

I discovered in writing this novel that most of us don't believe we have the kind of faith and courage that would allow us to be a martyr. But I've also found that God gives boldness and grace for each step of the journey, equal to what the situation demands, even grace unto death. Jesus himself wrestled in the garden before submitting to the Father's will and embracing the cross.

I've also discovered how powerful it is when others know that our faith doesn't just help us to live well; it also helps us die well. In AD 197, in a letter to Roman authorities, Tertullian said it this way:

“Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is proof that we are innocent. Therefore God allows that we thus suffer. . . . Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you. . . . The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”

8. *Reviewers suggest that this book weaves together secular history and biblical history in a unique way. How is this book different from other historical novels set in first-century Rome?*

I'm not sure I can speak for all historical novels, but I do think that many books set in the first century tell the story from the point of view of a biblical character or a person on the bottom rung of Roman society. By contrast, *The Advocate* is told from the point of view of one of Rome's leading advocates, a man who experienced Jesus firsthand but also interacted with Roman emperors and the Roman Senate. We sometimes lose sight of the fact that the Christian faith was incubated in a hostile world ruled by Rome. Christian leaders like Paul and Roman rulers like Nero crossed paths. We should not isolate church history from what was happening in the broader political context.



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9. *How accurate is the book historically? How can readers know what parts are fiction and what parts are historical reality?*

As a history lover, I have worked hard on the historical details. That's one reason it took me so long to write the book—I felt like I first needed to really understand the culture, politics, and people of the time. People who have read the book have many questions that start with “Did [fill in the blank] really happen?” For the most part, my answer is “yes.” I did not knowingly fudge the history just to make the story work. Plus, the reality of what happened in first-century Rome is quite often stranger than any fiction writer could imagine. That said, the book *is* fiction, so there are fictional characters and the main story line is fictional, though I've woven it into the actual history of the era (if that makes sense). At the beginning of the book is a list of characters that notes which ones are historical and which are fictional. I also intend to put up notes for each chapter on my website to detail which parts of the story are real and which parts I imagined.

10. *It could be argued that our modern-day society is reminiscent of first-century Rome. What are some of the similarities? What lessons can we learn in this novel that still ring true today?*

This was shocking to me—how much first-century Rome was like twenty-first-century America. Rome was the greatest power in the world, but it had abandoned the values that originally made it great. A Roman poet decried this state of affairs, calling the Caesars “emperors of bread and circus.” What he meant was that Rome's rulers garnered public approval not through exemplary service but through creating a state of entitlement among the Romans (more than 400,000 Romans got free bread from the state) and by entertaining them with elaborate gladiator games and chariot races. Moreover, Rome's rulers and intellectual elites led Rome down a path of sexual degradation, and the gap between the rich and poor became greater and greater. Treason trials were the order of the day and nobody dared say anything that was “politically incorrect.”

In terms of lessons, we should look at how Christianity grew and flourished in such a culture. The early Christians didn't try to reform the government through laws but chose to live differently in a hostile culture, winning the hearts of individuals. The power of the Spirit and the message of the gospel would eventually sweep the Empire, resulting in reform and cultural change that never could have been ushered in politically.