

Theodora – Actress. Empress. Whore. A Novel by Stella Duffy.  
Virago Press 2010.

In her latest novel Stella Duffy has focussed on Theodora, the girl who came from the humblest of beginnings and ended up married to the Roman Emperor Justinian.

Duffy's Theodora is brave, determined and calculating, with a will to succeed and be the best born from her earliest days; following the death of her father she joins a group of girls whose mission, under the harsh eye of their instructor Menander, is to entertain men with song, music and dancing, and later with their bodies.

Theodora excels at everything, becoming notorious in Constantinople and eventually having to flee incognito to Egypt where she undergoes a series of trials before becoming a Christian and returning to Constantinople on a holy mission.

Duffy's Theodora is a dynamic and feisty individual who lives on the edge, but somehow, in spite of her drive and will to succeed remains an object of sympathy too. She makes friends who will lay their lives on the line for her and enemies determined to take her own and the reader is swept along by her story.

This is an engaging and well written tale of one of early Christianity's significant figures who became, with her husband, a saint of the Orthodox church.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh