

DAAD Summer School
“Dialogue on Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis”

POMPEII IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Pompeii was a large Roman town in the Italian region of Campania which was completely buried in volcanic ash following the eruption of nearby Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE. The town was excavated in the 19th and 20th century CE and due to its excellent state of preservation it has given an invaluable insight into the Roman world and may lay claim to being the richest archaeological site in the world in terms of the sheer volume of data available to scholars. It is one of the most significant proofs of Roman civilization and, like an open book, provides outstanding information on the art, customs, trades and everyday life of the past.

Keywords: (max 5)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Iliana Makaridou , 23 years old, born on January 21,1993.I've been living in Komotini all my life. Traveling is one of my hobbies. I am currently studying at Department of Language, Literature and Culture of the Black Sea Countries-Democritus University of Thrace. I would like to travel all over the world. I'm a nice fun and friendly person, I'm trying my best to be punctual. I have a creative mind and am always up for new challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, archaeologists, architects and even artists are being inspired by ancient Rome anew. The ancient Roman city of Pompeii has been frequently featured in literature and popular culture since its modern rediscovery. No one would deny that Pompeii, the city destroyed by the forces of nature – as when, in the words of the poet Leopardi, ‘an overripe tomato falls on an anthill’ – has attained the status of an archetype, outpacing even Atlantis. Upon their rediscovery in the second quarter of the 18th century, Pompeii and Herculaneum became the objects of an important dispute between ‘owner’, the king of Naples, and ‘users’, classically educated travelers from the north. This was an uneven contest which the travelers won easily, though the king and his successors attempted and in part succeeded in shaping the narrative in important ways: through acquisition and appropriation of property as patrimony, and management of the archaeological sites (‘scavi di Pompei’, etc.). The visitors, for their part, mostly antiquarians and ‘virtuosi’ to begin with, morphed into poets, librettists, novelists, diarists, painters, professional archaeologists, psychologists, and other curiosity seekers, and ranged in social status from lowly vagabonds to heads of state.

The nine books of *Antichità d'Ercolano Esposte* by the Accademia Ercolanese (from 1757 onwards), as well as the works of Winckelmann, Francois Mazois and William Gell, informed the whole of Europe about what was being revealed as the ancient Roman towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii were slowly being uncovered.

Discoveries aroused great interest, and emotion, among Enlightenment circles - and offered many new subjects for cultural debate. Slowly a new, Neo-classical, attitude emerged, influencing philosophers, men of letters and artists. Painters, sculptors, jewelers, upholsterers, cabinet-makers, joiners, decorators - all made explicit reference to the findings in the towns that Vesuvius buried, and there was a constant demand for books illustrated with accurate pictures.

Many European countries, thanks to the new importance given to the ancient world, opened academies in Naples and Rome to offer hospitality to those who wanted to study the newly excavated towns. In this period the younger members of many of the noble and rich families of Europe completed their education by doing a 'grand tour' of Europe, and a visit to Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Museo Archeologico in Naples was considered an essential part of these trips.

The diaries of some of the people who made these journeys show how much influence the excavations had all over Europe, and these discoveries certainly eventually gave rise to modern archaeology, and led to the finding of many other ancient Greek and Roman towns.

Pompeii served as the background for the historic novels *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (since adapted for film and TV), *Arria Marcella* (1852) by Théophile Gautier, *The Taras Report on Pompeii* (1975) by Alan Lloyd. Pompeii also appears in *Shadows in Bronze* (1990) and other novels in the Marcus Didius Falco series.

Book I of the Cambridge Latin Course teaches Latin while telling the story of a Pompeii resident, Lucius Caecilius Iucundus, from the reign of Nero to that of Vespasian. The book ends when Mount Vesuvius erupts, where Caecilius and his household are killed. The books have a cult following and students have been known to go to Pompeii just to track down Caecilius's house.

Louis Untermeyer wrote the short story, "The Dog of Pompeii", which centered on a blind orphan boy and his dog during the last days before Vesuvius erupted.

A number of titles in The Roman Mysteries series of children's historical novels by Caroline Lawrence are set in Pompeii.

The bestseller novel *Pompeii* (2003) by Robert Harris tells the story of a (fictional) Aquarius of the real life Aqua Augusta named Marcus Attilius. The story itself also features a Pliny the Younger reference to the Estate of Julia Felix, as well as also including the Piscina Mirabilis in Misenum, Pliny the Elder, and his nephew Gaius Pliny. Pompeii's posthumous existence, beginning in 1748, lends it a unique sense of privilege, as if it were chosen by history to intrigue the modern consciousness. It's signification must be

probed by reference to writers who defined it more comprehensively than did Scott and Dickens. The first important literary work to meditate upon Pompeii as a new fact, a specifically modern source of suggestions, is Madame de Stael's novel of 1805, *Corinne or Italy*, a sentimental romance in which eighteenth century lovers visit the new excavated sites of Campania. Always a critic of Caesarism and the imperial style, de stael takes care to make Pompeii a place of superior spiritual power to Rome. "Pompeii is the most curious ruin of antiquity" she writes.

The Romantic period is usually remembered for its piety toward nature, and yet works like Leopardi's reveal that the unremitting attention to the forms of nature arises from irritation rather than reverence, "*the hostility the intellect feels against nature..and her evil, reason-denying power*", as one of Thomas Mann's characters puts it in *The Magic Mountain*, a novel that draws directly upon Leopardi's meditation. Nature's mutability insures its power over the human imagination, for the adult increasingly identifies contingencies in the external world with the oncoming (but unpredictable) death of biological or natural being. "*Nature is often fascinated by what she dreads*", writes Madame de Stael, and illustrates her thesis by having Corinne and her fiancé, early in the novel, wonder at a fiery black cloud issuing from Vesuvius, Corinne interprets this omen as a sign of her mortality, and in the penultimate paragraph of the novel, when she sees similar cloud, she points to it with a sigh and expires.

What is true for the single individual is true for everyone and everything subject to the laws of generation and decay, a universal extinction. Romantic artists sought high and low for images that would summon this harrowing truth to consciousness- this terror of unexpected death they shared with every reader. In our own time the popular vehicles of such terror have been books and films about earthquakes, towering infernos, killer sharks and Satanic possession. In the last century Italian volcanoes such as Vesuvius and Etna helped produce the same catharsis of pity and terror.

Ever since Pliny the Younger's eyewitness account of Vesuvius' eruption, during which he imagined that "there are no gods left anywhere, and that the last and eternal night is come upon the world," the meaning of the event had been apocalyptic. As with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the quantity of victims in Pompeii made it seem a microcosm of unknowable holocausts that might overtake humanity at any time. Writers understood that readers would respond immediately and viscerally to the simplest rhetorical structure: a presence threatened with absence. Dramatizations of the Last Day had been popular in Europe long before Pompeii came along as a fresh trope to achieve the same frisson of horror and part of Pompeii's attraction was certainly its consanguinity with Christian drama. That it can serve the most contemporary version of apocalypse is shown by the title poem of C. A. Trypanis' *Pompeian Dog* (1964). The reference is to the dog of Vesuvius Primus, whose cast, in a contorted posture of agony, was placed in the first room of the recent exhibition – a witty gesture for one naturally thought of the dog Cerberus greeting the doomed soul at the entrance to Hades.

In Leopardi's time it was the geologists' discovery that the subterranean regions were molten, or "volcanic", that provided a context for universal fears of annihilation by fire in the manner of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In our time it is, of course, fear of nuclear destruction that underlies Trypanis' image of "a world of unforgiving flame". Every living person is signified by that helpless dog, each tied by some master, well-meaning or malevolent, to an iron chain of historical necessity. Each is superfluous, an orphan of the storm that may consume him at any time. In Malcolm Lowry's short story "The Present Estate of Pompeii" (1961) the Canadian visitor to Pompeii has a similar perception of his creaturely condition. He comes to see that "man no longer belongs to or understands the world he has created. Man had become a raven staring at a ruined heronry. We'll let him deduce his own raven hood from it if he could."

In such pessimistic versions Vesuvius is always the metaphorical villain, the Destroyer pure and simple. In poems about Vesuvius selected by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for his anthology, *Poems of Places* (1877), the volcano is reviled variously as Satan "a spirit of Desolation" a "blight" a "Lord of fiery doom...that Scowls with dull eyes of hate" a "wild despot" and much else. The perspective is that of a victim or potential victim looking upward from the City of Humanity, the symbolic Pompeii, toward his future destroyer. There is a kind of appreciation in these poems of the sublime power of the volcano it is seen in one phrase as "an

image of drear eternity” and given as all the respect eternity deserves, but writers in general have treated Vesuvius with much less reverence than have painters. For the most part the responses of writers have been Trypanis’ howl of rage. Images of pagan activity to condemn the rituals of the mystery religions. Pompeii is reviled in sample poems from the nineteenth century as “a white city of illicit loves / Hostess of all the infamy of Rome” and “a marble harlot” holding a “Gircean court on ruin’s brink.”¹ Sumner Lincoln Fairfax’s dreary two hundred page poem, *The Last Night of Pompeii* (1832), represents the most thorough denunciation of Pompeii’s “universal licentiousness,” the efficient cause, according to Fairfax, of its heaven-sent destruction.

One must read these narrow-spirited poems in order to appreciate the achievement of Edward Bulwer-Lytton in the most famous of all works about Pompeii, his novel of 1834, *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Lytton began his work in Italy, inspired first by Karl Bryullov’s painting, *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1828), and then by a trip to the ruins of Campania. He blended form and content expertly by selecting the precise medium, the historical novel, which would permit him space to include all the data about daily life in ancient Pompeii that a century of excavation had yielded up. But like his model, Sir Walter Scott, Lytton subordinated such details to a higher intellectual purpose. Himself a product of the Age of Revolutions, a time when a coherent cultural tradition reaching back to classical Greece and Rome was clearly in a stage of transformation, Lytton constructed a paradigm of radical change that would assist his readers in understanding their own confusing era. Specifically, Lytton documents the supersession of older Mediterranean religions by the emergent form of Christianity. In this, the novel resembles Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, and like that later work it attempts to display to the increasingly brutalized England of the Victorian period the sweetness of spiritual light that lay near at hand. A reader of Lytton’s time could not miss the constant parallel of Pompeii and London life; not only does the author make explicit comparisons of manners and customs, but his characters necessarily speak with an idiomatic English tongue. Gladiators resort to dreadful oaths like “Tush” and “Stuff.” In summary, one might recall William Blake’s remark, “As a man is, So he Sees.” The views of Pompeii have been and will continue to be various and indeterminate. For some writers the continuous threat of annihilation symbolized by Vesuvius harrows their existence, causing a “migraine of alienation,” a sense of the absurd. But for others, Pompeii is made attractive by its preserved status, its paradoxical life as a resurrected city of art. Such beguiling beauty as visited America in the recent exhibition has the power, like Keats’s urn, to “tease us out of thought” and render us as spectators more perfectly happy in the timelessness we penetrate by looking at treasures time has redeemed. And yet there are dangers in this consolation, for retrospective love can destroy as effectively as molten lava; it can draw the enchanted onlooker into an abyss of the past which yields nothing back but apparitions. All we can say for sure is that the experience of Pompeii has compelled writers to take some kind of stance toward the fundamental conditions of life. There can be no conclusion, no one statement of the truth of Pompeii, only more and more current examples. The most current at this writing is Loren Eiseley’s report in his posthumously published volume of poems, *Another Kind, of Autumn* (1977), of a journey to Pompeii. We should not be surprised if it recalls the first document of such a journey, Pliny the Younger’s letter to Tacitus. Eiseley concludes:

I departed in silence and asked grace of the destroyer — being a man and humble before winds, temblors, and all things that strike out of season be they gods possessed, or forces unknown, equally driven out of human orbit. Make the sign and hope to see morning. Nothing has changed since the shrines boiled in the mud at Herculaneum. Men return and the ring of fire may be brooding even now like a scorpion curled in the hearthstone.

There is another way by which writers have formulated the meaning of Pompeii and Vesuvius, one that is implicit in the images I have cited above. That is the transposing of labels so that Pompeii is considered the Destroyer. Some works, in other words, direct their howling indignation not toward the mountain but toward the city. A religious allegory is usually visible in such protests, in which Vesuvius represents God or Providence, and Pompeii some guilty city such as Sodom or Babylon. One might say that the graffito, “Sodoma Gomora,” apparently scrawled on a ruined wall of Pompeii shortly after the catastrophe, originated this, literary tradition. The reputation of Pompeii as a sinful resort catering to the lusts and vanity of wealthy

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Neapolitans and Romans, such as Trimalchio in the *Satyricon*, serves to connect the ruined city with those wicked places condemned in the prophetic books of the Bible. To the early Christians Pompeii would have been an abomination. Later Christians often used well-preserved

The story of the manga *NG Life* (serialized from 2005-2009) revolves around a Japanese student who has apparently retained his memories of having been a gladiator in Pompeii, who lost his wife in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

In Theresa Breslin's *Dream Master: Gladiator, Cy and the Dream Master* travel back in time to the eve of the Mt. Vesuvius eruption.

In Daniel Godfrey's *New Pompeii* (Titan Books, 2016), the population of ancient Pompeii is transported through time to the present day and into a replica of their town.

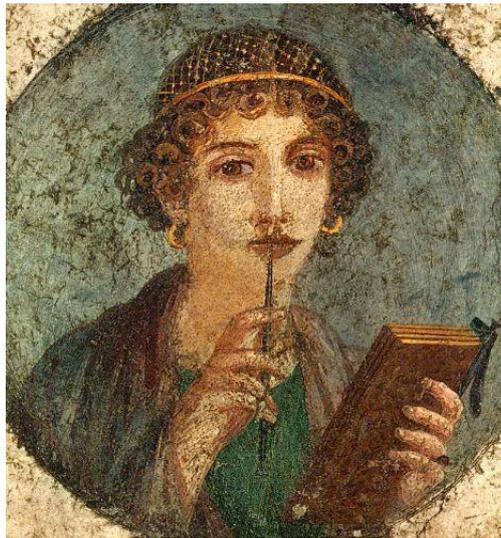


Figure 1. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Pompeii is often seen as a moment frozen in time. It is presented to the public through exhibits and artworks as a site that has remained unchanged since its original burial. However, the continual adaptation of the site in modern discourse shows the inaccuracy of this premise. Not only did Pompeii have a long history before the eruption but perceptions of the site also carried on changing after its burial by Mount Vesuvius.

Pompeii is what we would term a cognitive landscape, a site of remembrance that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by our own experiences. Images of Pompeii have become invested with the discourses that define our own world views, ever changing within the circumstances through which they are interpreted. They become framed within a long history of philosophical development, not evident in the time in which the entities themselves originated.

These entities then present coherent images to the viewer, unquestioning of their hidden preconceptions. Trypanis writes that historic sites are appropriated by the living so that they can 'sleep the life that went before'. This expresses the imaginative potential the site has as a juncture between our own time and that of the ancients, and the ease with which we become absorbed in the dream it has come to represent.

Whether manifested in works of art, literature or scientific theories, our views of Pompeii show a dialectic relationship between historical truth and interpretation according to the psychological needs of the individual or community. In this sense the historical consciousness in the Pompeian anthology is constituted by what the senses perceive but also by what the imaginations and emotions create.

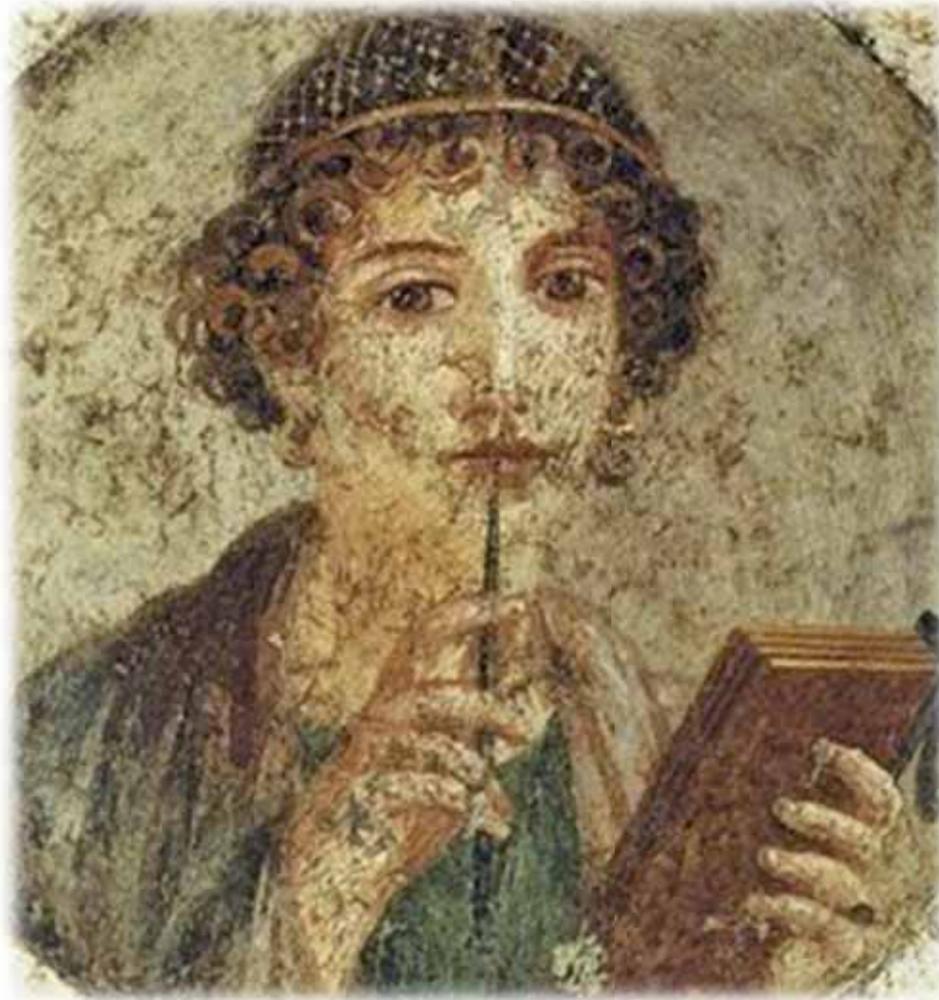
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Iliana Makaridou

Pompeii in literature



26 Sept. 2016

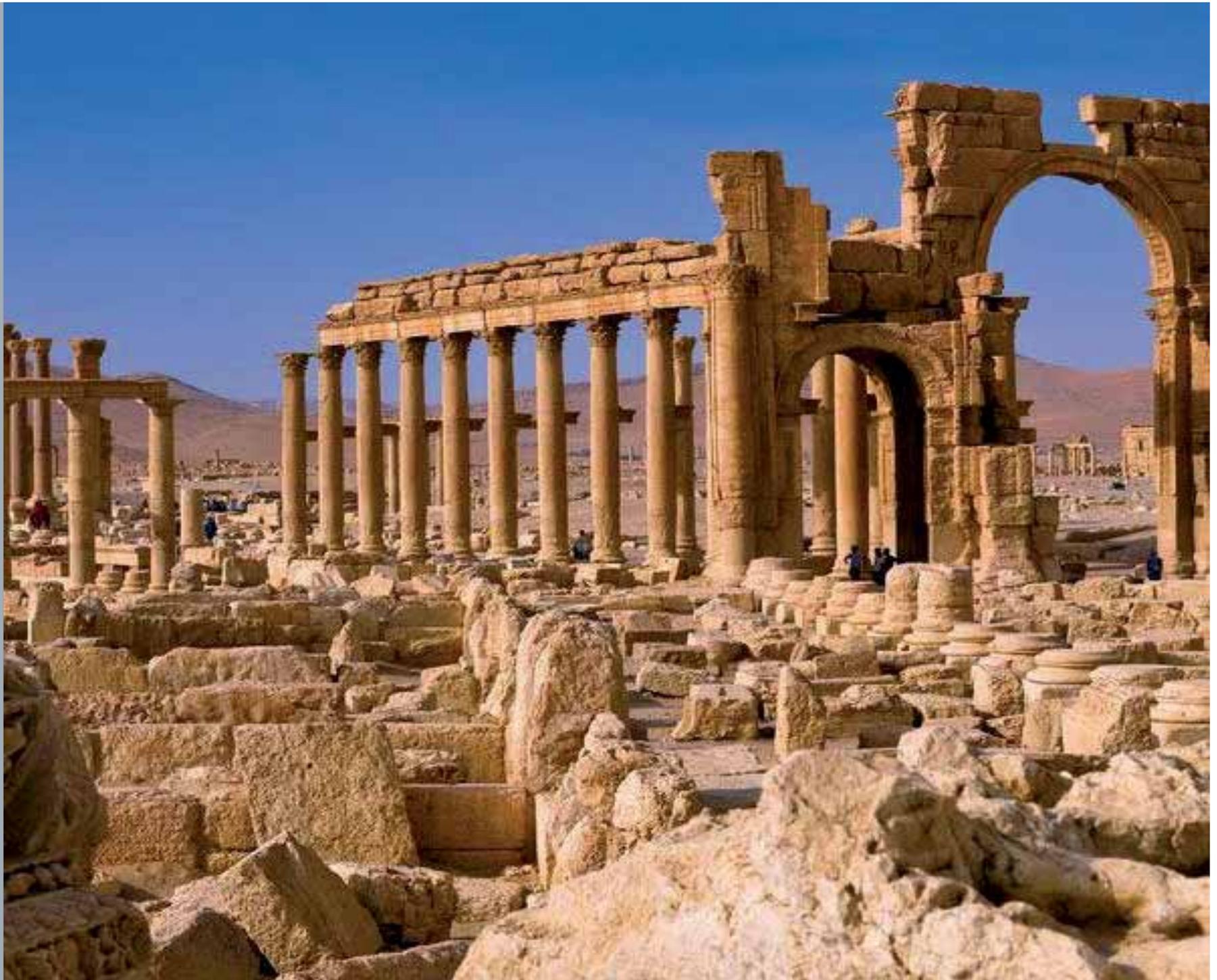
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Pompeii in ancient literature

From the ancient times Pompeii has been the main subject in literature.



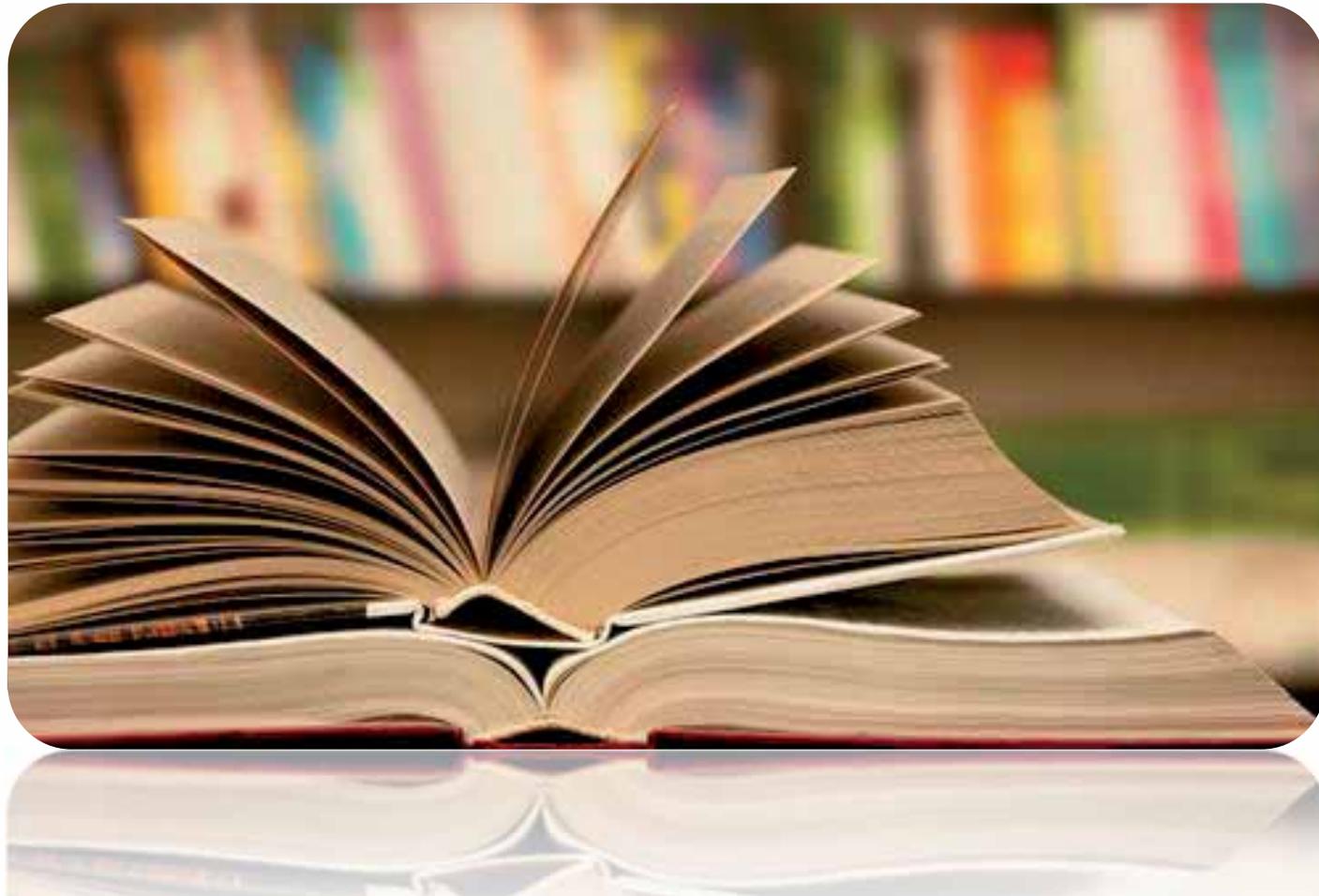
Letters of Pliny the Younger to Tacitus

- *A few years after the event, Pliny wrote a friend, Cornelius Tacitus, describing the happenings of late August 79 AD when the eruption of Vesuvius obliterated Pompeii, killed his Uncle and almost destroyed his family. At the time, Pliny was eighteen and living at his Uncle's villa in the town of Misenum.*
- *In a second letter to Tacitus, Pliny describes what happened to him and to his mother during the second day of the disaster.*

References of Pompeii

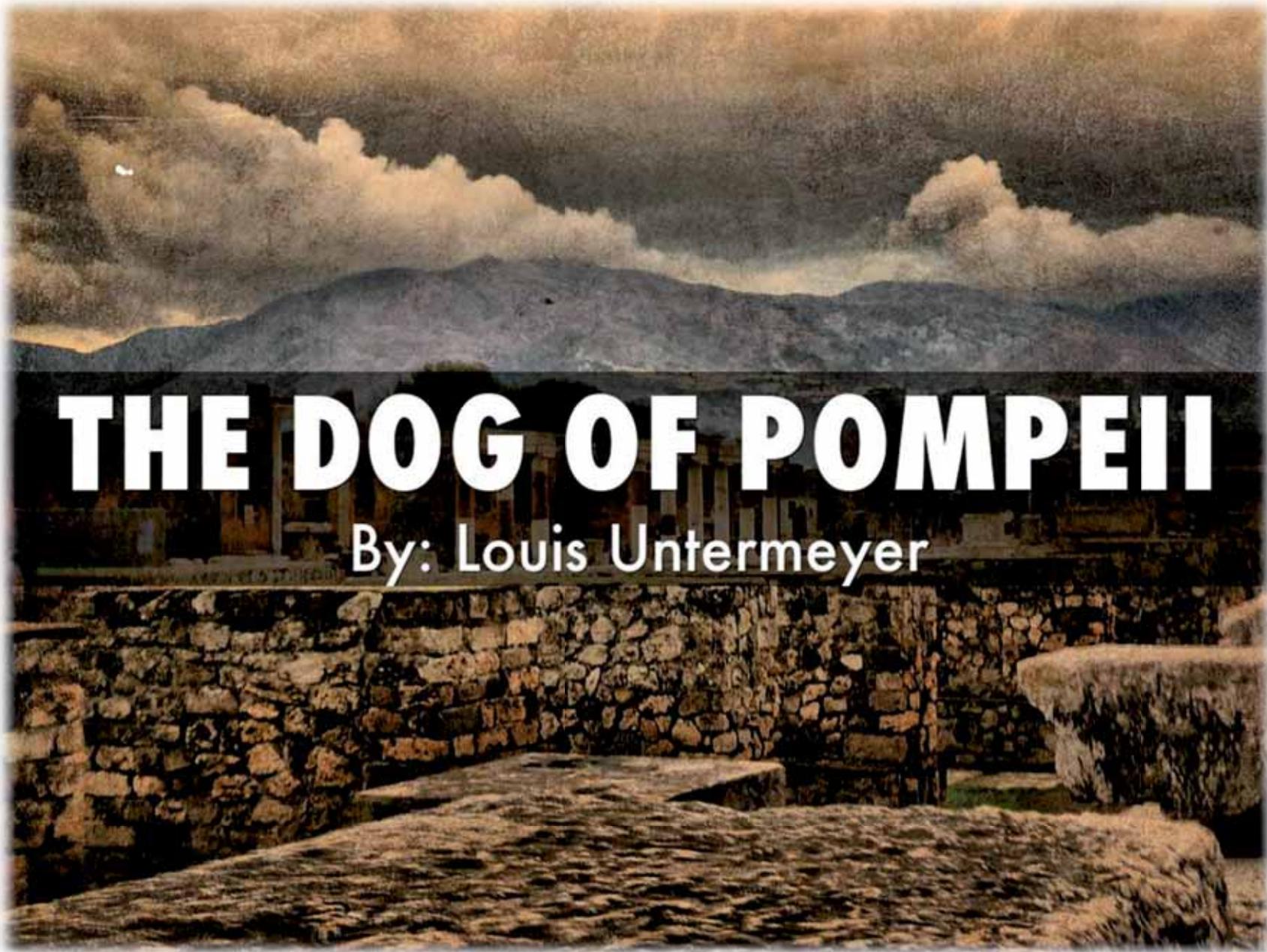
- Dio 66.21-23*
- Martial Ep. 4.44*
- Statius Silvae 4.4.78-86*
- Tacitus Annals 15.22.2*
- Seneca NQ 6.1*
- Strabo 5.4.8*
- Vitruvius 2.6.2*
- Pliny NH 3.40,3.60*
- Cato Agr.135.1-3*
- Statius Silvae 3.5.72-104*
- Florus 1.11.3-6*
- Livy 9.38.2*
- Appian BC 1.39,1.50*
- Velleius 2.16.1-2*
- Orosius 5.18.22*
- Cicero pro Sulla 60-62*
- Cicero Fam. 7.1
- Cicero Fam. 7.4 **
- [Q. Cicero] Comm. pet 30-32*
- Seneca Ep. 49.1, 70.1*
- Seneca Ep. 56.1-2*
- Seneca, Ep. 86.1-13*
- Tacitus Annals 14.17.1-2*
- Cicero Letters A 5.2**
- Cicero Letters A 14.17**

Pompeii in modern literature



- The Last Days of Pompeii (1834)
by Edward Bulwer-Lytton
- Arria Marcella (1852)
by Théophile Gautier
- The Taras Report on Pompeii
(1975) by Alan Lloyd
- Shadows in Bronze (1990)
- and other novels in the Marcus
Didius Falco series

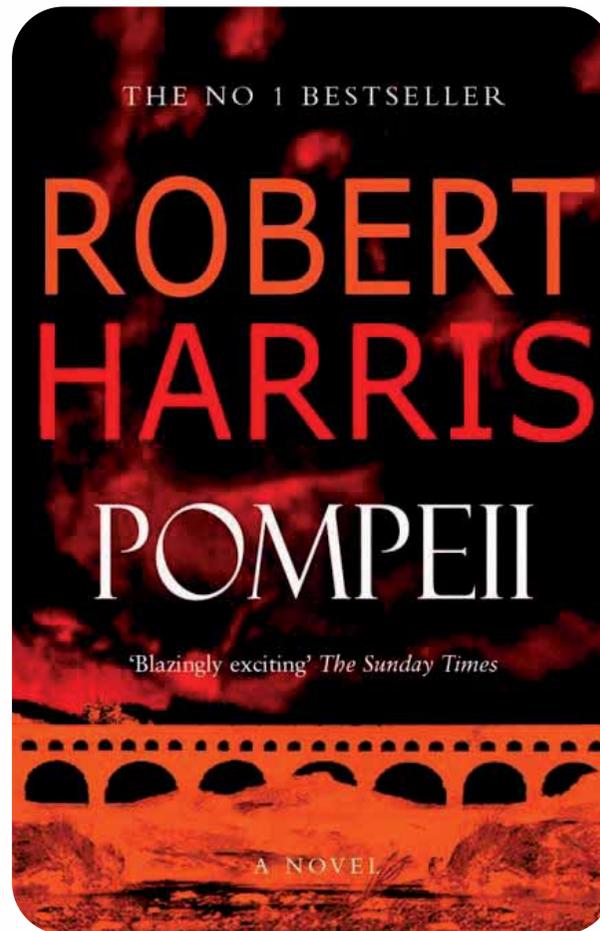




THE DOG OF POMPEII

By: Louis Untermeyer

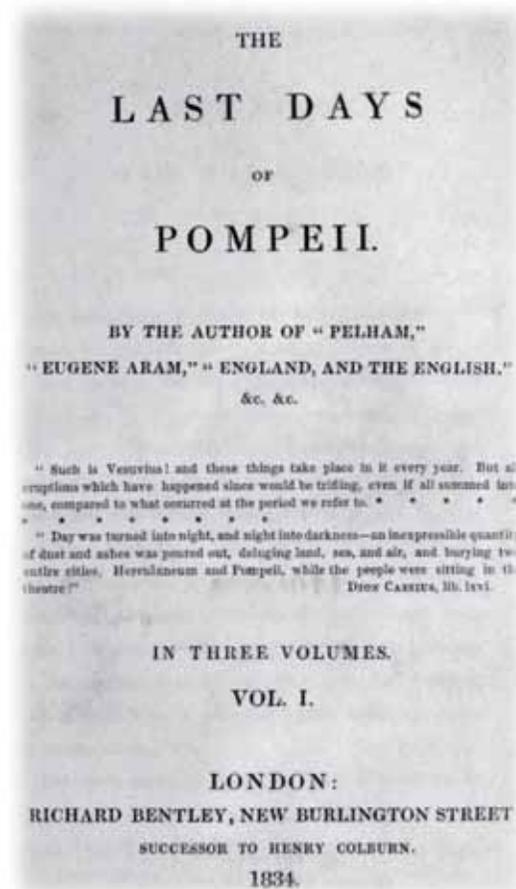
Pompeii (2003) by Robert Harris





The Romantic Period (1798-1832)

The Last Days of Pompeii



Pompeii and Vesuvius in literature



Other books

- *The story of the manga NG Life (serialized from 2005-2009) revolves around a Japanese student who has apparently retained his memories of having been a gladiator in Pompeii, who lost his wife in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.*
- *In Theresa Breslin's Dream Master: Gladiator, Cy and the Dream Master travel back in time to the eve of the Mt. Vesuvius eruption.*
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