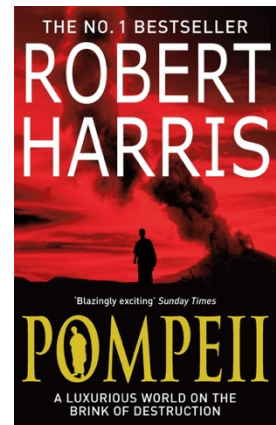


## Pompeii

by Robert Harris

A sweltering week in late August, 79 AD. Where better to enjoy the last days of summer than on the beautiful Bay of Naples?

But even as Rome's richest citizens relax in their villas around Pompeii and Herculaneum, there are ominous warnings that something is going wrong. Wells and springs are failing, a man has disappeared, and now the greatest aqueduct in the world - the mighty Aqua Augusta - has suddenly ceased to flow. Through the stories of four main characters Robert Harris recreates a luxurious world on the brink of destruction.



### Writing suspense

One critic describes the novel as 'addictive as a thriller' but as readers we know from the beginning that the volcano is going to erupt. 'Not so much *whodunit* as *whenwillit*'. Do you think the book manages to keep us gripped despite this? If so, how?

### Characters and stories

The novel has four main characters: Attilius, the engineer; Ampliatus, the fabulously wealthy ex-slave; his daughter Corelia, and Pliny, the naval commander. Who did you find most interesting and why?

### Fact and fiction

In general, do you like historical fiction? Why / why not?

Each chapter begins with a quotation from scientific studies of volcanology and the book is full of detailed descriptions of Roman engineering, especially the aqueducts built to carry water across great distances. Did you find this interesting or a distraction from the story?

Most of the characters are fictional but Pliny was real – a naturalist and writer, a naval and army commander and a friend of the Emperor Vespasian. Is it ok for writers to insert historical figures into novels and to imagine meetings with made-up characters? What objections might there be?

*Pompeii* combines a historical disaster from almost 2000 years ago with a fictional love story. Most readers are fine with this. But does the idea of a novel about invented characters involved in the Grenfell fire disturb you? Why / why not?

What about novels or dramas based on real and living people, like the Royal family in *The Crown* or Benedict Cumberbatch as Dominic Cummings in *Brexit: The Uncivil War*?

### **The ending**

Did you like the uncertainty about whether Attilius and Corelia survived? Why / why not?

In general, what makes a good novel ending?

### **A novel about modern America?**

The novel was first published in 2003. Robert Harris has said, 'It struck me that Rome might be a way to write about America'. Can you see parallels?

### **Look especially at the quotations at the beginning of the book:**

*'American superiority in all matters of science, economics, industry...was total and indisputable. Even Europeans suffering the pangs of wounded chauvinism looked on with awe at the brilliant example the United States had set for the world as the third millennium began.'* Tom Wolfe, *Hooking Up*

*'In the whole world, wherever the vault of heaven turns, there is no land so well adorned with all that wins Nature's crown as Italy...'* Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*

And maybe look again at the description of the aftermath of the eruption:

*'The further he went the more clogged the road became, and the more pitiful the state of the fleeing population. Most were coated in a thick grey dust, their hair frosted.'*

Is there an echo of the images of 9/11 here?

### **Other books by Robert Harris**

Harris's novels are set in many different historical periods and cover very different subjects:

- *Enigma*: about the breaking of the German Enigma code during the Second World War
- *Fatherland*: an 'alternative history' which imagines the aftermath of a German victory in the Second World War
- *An Officer and a Spy*: the fictionalised story of Alfred Dreyfus, a real Jewish army officer imprisoned on Devil's Island for spying against France in 1894, and the attempts of Georges Picquart to expose the racist injustice of his conviction
- *Conclave*: a thriller set over 72 hours in the Vatican during the election of a fictional pope

### **Other historical fiction set in ancient Rome**

- Lindsey Davis: there are over 30 crime novels featuring either her Roman detective Marcus Didius Falco or his daughter Flavia Albia
- Robert Harris: *Imperium*, *Lustrum* and *Dictator*: a trilogy of novels about Cicero, the Roman historian and orator
- Stephen Saylor: over 20 crime novels in his Roma sub Rosa series, featuring detective Gordianus the Finder
- Simon Scarrow: best known for his Eagles of the Empire series of novels about military campaigns in the territories of the Roman Empire, including ancient Britain