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Indice generale

Joanna Paul

"A city famed throughout the world": Pompeii in 20th and 21st century fiction

It was arguably the 1834 publication of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, that ensured that Pompeii would indeed become 'a city famed throughout the world'. Though she had been rediscovered some 80 years previously, provoking excitement and interest among Europe's elite, her celebrity – and her notoriety – was by no means widespread in these early decades. The *Grand Tour* had not yet evolved into the more accessible European tourism circuit, and those who did make it to Naples in the late 18th and early 19th centuries found their ability to visit both the site and its treasures severely restricted, even visitors of the calibre of Goethe or Winckelmann. Bulwer-Lytton was responsible for initiating a new phase in Pompeii's reception history, though, and was pivotal in bringing wider audiences under her spell and democratising her appeal. Coinciding with the rapid expansion of the publishing industry, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was hugely successful and widely read throughout the West, and continued to be so for a long time.

Readership figures are elusive, but we can easily observe the impact that it had on the public, making Pompeii an object of fascination, and powerfully shaping responses to the site for years to come. Visitors would walk around with the novel in hand instead of any other guidebook, artists like Alma-Tadema would paint the novel's principal characters, Glaucus and Nydia (1867) and some half a dozen TV and cinema adaptations would appear over the years[1]. The popular imagination relied heavily on Bulwer-Lytton's template to supply it not only with Pompeii's lost inhabitants, and the details of their daily lives, but also the moralising narrative which was widely applied to the events of 79, that of the sinful pagan city punished by a Christian God. Of course, none of this sprang purely from Bulwer-Lytton's imagination – he was indebted to predecessors such as Sir William Gell, author of *Pompeiana* (the first edition of which appeared in 1817), who escorted him around the site, or Karl Briullov, painter of a grandiose vision of Pompeii's Last Days which Bulwer-Lytton saw shortly before commencing his work (*The Last Day of Pompeii*, 1830-33). Four years previously, a Thomas Gray had also written a novel, *The Vestal; or a Tale of Pompeii*, but it seems to have had nowhere near the impact of Bulwer-Lytton's creation. He cast a long shadow that no other Anglophone author could easily escape, for over a century.

Now, though, this shadow must seem all but invisible to the public. *The Last Days of Pompeii* is scarcely read, only reissued by print-on-demand publishers (though its availability second-hand indicates how wide its circulation once was) and Bulwer-Lytton is mocked for his florid, melodramatic prose, not least through the annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest for Bad Writing[2]. So if this once vastly popular novel has fallen from favour, has anything taken its place in the popular imagination of Pompeii? This question has so far received little scholarly attention, but I shall attempt at least an overview in this paper. 'A city famed throughout the world' *is* an apt description of the Victorian literary Pompeii, but in fact it comes from Robert Harris' novel, *Pompeii* (2003: quotation from p. 240 of the Hutchinson hardback

edition). This prominent and well-regarded novel might seem to be the first really successful mainstream fictionalisation of Pompeii since Bulwer-Lytton, but in fact, there has been a relatively steady flow of work for some decades now: the following table presents just some of the titles.

1957	Richard Llewellyn	***The Flame of Hercules***
1959	Frederic Wakeman	***Vergina Q.***
1960	Jack Lindsay	***The Writing on the Wall: An Account of Pompeii in its Last Days***
1961	Theodore Pratt	***The Lovers of Pompeii***
1965	Ronald Bassett	***The Pompeians***
	Barbara Ker Wilson	***In The Shadow of Vesuvius***
1966	Martin Saul	***The Nights of Pompeii***
1968	Lilian Carroll	***Greek Slave Boy***
1974	William Melton	***Nine Lives to Pompeii***
1975	Alan Lloyd	***The Taras Report on the Last Days of Pompeii***
1978	Richard Ben Sapir	***The Far Arena***
1985	David Wind	***The Last Days of Pompeii***
1990	Lindsey Davis	***Shadows in Bronze***
1992	Susan Sontag	***The Volcano Lover: A Romance***
1996	Amélie Nothomb	***Péplum***
2001	Caroline Lawrence	***The Secrets of Vesuvius; The Pirates of Pompeii***
2003	Robert Harris	***Pompeii***
	Danila Comastri Montanari	***Ars moriendi - Un'indagine a Pompei***
2004	Mark Gatiss	***The Vesuvius Club***
	Theresa Breslin	***Dream Master: Gladiator***
2005	Alex Butterworth, Ray Laurence	***Pompeii: The Living City***
2006	Deanna Ashford	***Barbarian Prize (Black Lace)***
2008	Alain Jaubert	***Une nuit à Pompéi***
	Carol Goodman	***The Night Villa***

We can ask, then, what forms the basis of Pompeii's literary fame today: does it owe anything to the work done by Bulwer-Lytton and his contemporaries? Do the modes of fictional representation employed by today's writers resemble their predecessors, or do they look for original ways of reanimating the city? To frame this in terms of reception, we might ask what is being received? Are these novels receptions of Pompeii or receptions of Bulwer-Lytton receiving Pompeii, multiple links in the long chain of response and refiguring which characterises modernity's engagements with the past?

There is no hope of covering all of the Pompeian fictions that have emerged over the last century here, but I shall outline some general trends in such works before focusing on a couple of recent novels which address some particularly fascinating themes. In 1966, Wolfgang Leppmann, in his *Pompeii in Fact and Fiction*, said that he was 'tempted… to consider as closed the development of a literary tradition which could properly be called Pompeiian'[3], lamenting the fact that great writers were no longer attracted to the city. In fact, as a brief glance at the above list shows, it was in fact the 1960s that saw a

mini-explosion of Pompeii novels, albeit not by the great writers that Leppmann hoped for. The narrative scope of most of the novels published at the end of the 50s and into the 60s is remarkably similar, adhering to the conventional 'last days' narrative laid out by Bulwer-Lytton, and often sketching out a story in particularly melodramatic, overblown terms, as this example of a jacket description shows:

> This time, Ronald Bassett tells the story of Pompeii – an arrogant, wealthy city… a city where slavery, sexual depravity, savage gladiatorial combats and crippling usury formed a background to hazardous and evil intrigues. The adventures – dangerous and romantic – of Eupor, a young Roman centurion, come to a thrilling climax in catastrophe when Vesuvius erupts, spreading terror on the licentious town below (Bassett, *The Pompeians).*

Worthy of particular attention is *The Flame of Hercules* (1957), by Richard Llewellyn. It is utterly predictable in its story of forbidden love, Christian miracle, and cataclysmic finale:

> GARVAN… a fugitive galley-slave from Gaul seeking refuge in the savage pagan city of Herculaneum…
> GENESSA… beautiful daughter of a noble Roman family, dedicated by her parents to a life of chastity in the Temple of Diana. Deeply in love, the future seems to offer nothing but despair…or death! The Gaul's heroic battle for his life in the arena, the Christian miracle in the prison, and the cataclysmic finale – these are the tremendously and stirringly written highlights of Richard Llewellyn's novel of the undaunted love of two people in a dying city.

However, it is relatively unusual for actually setting the story in Herculaneum. Amusingly, in the frontispiece map, it has been given an arena roughly on the scale of the Colosseum, alongside other peculiarities such as a Caesar's Palace! Theodore Pratt's self-proclaimed 'daring novel', *The Lovers of Pompeii* (1961) also stands out for putting the erotica and licentious behaviour that has always been associated with Pompeii centre-stage, even if still rather coyly, a tactic which continues to the present day in a title such as *Barbarian Prize*, part of the Black Lace erotic literature imprint.

To gain a clearer understanding of Pompeii's meaning for modern novelists outside these few novels, we can attempt to categorise the narratives. The 1960s titles just mentioned fit into the first, largely conventional category of works which recreate the ancient city fairly straightforwardly. Conventionally, that city is Pompeii, and the narrative takes place in 79 AD, though as we have seen, Llewellyn switched his action to Herculaneum, whilst the action of the children's novels by Caroline Lawrence, *The Secrets of Vesuvius* and *The Pirates of Pompeii*, is also mainly outside Pompeii, the former mostly located in Stabiae, the second in Surrentum. As we will see, key episodes of Robert Harris' novel also take place outside Pompeii. Also relatively unusual would be a narrative which avoids the events of 79 AD, though the British writer Lindsey Davis does just that in *Shadows in Bronze*, set in 71, as does Danila Comastri Montanari with the 47 AD setting of her novel, *Ars Moriendi – Un'indagine a Pompei.* For many writers, though, Vesuvius' eruption is obviously far too exciting to ignore, and inevitably it forms the spectacular climax of the narrative, novelists using all their literary powers to describe the cataclysm. Lawrence's description is particularly memorable:

> As when soda is added to wine vinegar and it bubbles and froths over the edge of the cup, so a tide of fire poured down the volcano's cone. This was not a drift of warm ash falling gently from the heavens or a slow lava flow. This was a wave of yellow fire rushing towards them faster than galloping horses. The speeding flames lit up distant houses and olive groves and vineyards, and left them blazing as it passed.
> Flavia saw a row of tall poplar trees explode and then burn like torches. The poplars were two or three miles distant but already the ring of fire was bearing down upon them (p. 197).

This focus on the eruption is particularly necessary in those books which, like Bulwer-Lytton, made the moral central, particularly those from the sixties – Pompeii ultimately has meaning only in so far as its inhabitants are punished for their decadence, and references to divine punishment are woven right into the narrative and the description of the cataclysm ('The smell of brimstone was in the air and a passing woman shouted hysterically, "Sodom and Gomorrah!"', Pratt [1961], p. 136) But a 79AD setting also has the unfortunate effect of giving away the ending – we know that the town will be destroyed, we know when, and how. Partly in response to this, we can see a particular sub-category of Pompeian novels flourishing – the detective story, recently examined in some detail by Stefano Rocchi[4]. Roman detective stories are in abundance, anyway; Montanari's Publius Aurelius Statius, Stephen Saylor's Gordianus, Lindsey Davis' Marcus Didius Falco, and the Famous Five-esque children of Lawrence's Roman Mysteries, are all responsible for solving multiple crimes in ancient Rome; the 'Detective and the Toga' website also reveals that, over the past decade, an average of 16,8 Roman detective stories have been published each year[5]. Each of these authors just mentioned have used Pompeii as a location and we might also add Robert Harris' *Pompeii* here. Though the protagonist, Marcus Attilius Primus, is an aqueduct engineer, not a detective, the action is driven by his need to deduce the cause of Pompeii's failed water supply. So, the detective element either enhances, or compensates for, the predictable outcome of the narrative of 79 – as in Lawrence or Harris – or replaces it, as in Davis or Montanari, injecting suspense or tension into Pompeii in unconventional ways. It may also be significant that the detective narratives have gathered pace recently, just as the moralising urge has faded. These novels mostly avoid the heavy-handed preaching which characterised Bulwer-Lytton, and was in evidence into the 60s. Instead, the reasons for the disaster, and the Pompeians' interpretations of it, remain ambiguous and confused, a matter to be investigated. At the same time, the readers' superior knowledge clashes with the characters' ignorance, to great ironic effect. In Davis' *Shadows in Bronze*, for example, we hear that 'Pompeii's a place that intends to last', whilst this paper's title quotation from Harris belongs to an ironic prophecy issued by the sibyl Biria Onomastia.

The other two categories of Pompeian novels are smaller, but no less fascinating, offering revealing counterparts to the perspectives of the novels just outlined. The second group comprises those which deal with modern experiences of the site. These may be very diverse, covering any historical setting from the mid-18th century to the present day, including Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*, which fictionalises the lives of William and Emma Hamilton and their life in Naples, and a short story by Malcolm Lowry, 'The Present Estate of Pompeii' (1948), which foreshadows the narrative of Rossellini's 1954 film *Viaggio in Italia* by depicting the ennui and existential angst caused by a visit to the site. It is notable that these novels, whilst owing little to Bulwer-Lytton, can reflect other 19th century fictions depicting visits to the city. 185 years before Sontag, Madame de Stael had already borrowed aspects of the lives of the Hamiltons and their association with Pompeii, in her love story, *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) and over the next century, two novellas, Théophile Gautier's *Arria Marcella* (1852), and Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* (1903), each told a story of, broadly, the troubling psychical and psychological effects that might occur when a lovesick young man visits the ruins. This particular motif briefly recurs in a novel by Mark Gatiss, *The Vesuvius Club* (2004) – itself another mystery story – when the protagonist, Edwardian dandy and secret agent Lucifer Box, unexpectedly finds himself on the site by night, in a manner similar to Gautier's Octavien.

The final category is even more of a mixed bag, but is roughly characterised by novels which

depart from the conventions of realism or naturalism, or of novelistic fiction more generally, in their treatment of Pompeii. The device of time travel is one strategy here, and is absolutely central to Amélie Nothomb's *Péplum*. Again, this is hardly new for the 20th century: Gautier's *Arria Marcella* was also based around time travel or supernatural apparition, depending on your interpretation, but as we will see, the new capabilities and challenges of our world allow Nothomb to find new meanings in Pompeii. Finally, and all too briefly, there are those texts which are founded on a conscious mingling of fact and fiction. Of course, the line between the two is hardly clear-cut in any historical fiction, and all of the works that I have mentioned negotiate it in different ways. But some do so more overtly than others: Lloyd's *The Taras Report on the Last Days of Pompeii* (1975) fictionalises, though exceptionally heavy-handedly, its account of Pompeii's daily life and its destruction, by allowing it to be narrated by Taras, a Parthian envoy who finds himself in the city in 79. More recently, and much more deftly, the historian Ray Laurence's account of *Pompeii: The Living City* is interspersed with short fictional vignettes by Alex Butterworth; an interesting and often successful attempt to inject some life and emotion into the otherwise elusive inhabitants of the city. It should not go unnoticed, though, that the only chapter to avoid this tactic is the final one, 'Apocalypse'; revealing that the city's destruction was the one thing the writers felt could or should not be fictionalised.

This, then, gives us some idea of the scope of Pompeian fictions over the past century. I will end by exploring one issue in slightly more detail; it is a question faced by all those who seek to repeople a deserted city: where do we find those people? Addressing this question with regards to Pompeii allows us a glimpse of a perennial issue in classical scholarship and classical receptions; that is, the state of the surviving evidence, and the ways in which it can be evaluated. By way of context, Bulwer-Lytton declared that the *material* remains of Pompeii's inhabitants inspired many of his characters, from Arbaces the evil priest of Isis, related to a skeleton found in the temple – and Lytton was himself presented with a skull from the site which he kept on his desk at Knebworth – to the femme fatale Julia, conjured from possibly the most evocative lump of rock excavated at Pompeii, an imprint of a female bosom, long since lost, but exerting its power on a range of 19th century writers, from Chateaubriand to Gautier. Today, writers like Robert Harris will also use Pompeii's material evidence to repopulate it: hence his central character of Numerius Popidius Ampliatus, for example, the wealthy freedman attested by dedicatory inscriptions in the Temple of Isis. But we also see writers turning to another set of evidence, the literary tradition, resulting most notably in the frequent presence of Pliny the Elder. This is perhaps curious. There is no reason why he *has* to be there in a narrative of the 24 August 79 – he isn't in Bulwer-Lytton – and yet he is central to Harris, and Lawrence's *The Secrets of Vesuvius*. Such novels invest heavily in Pliny as a central player in the events surrounding the eruption; and though we may typically only think of him as a scholarly or intellectual hero, if we think of him as a hero at all, in the novels he tends to be a heroic figure dying a heroic Roman death – as Harris's description shows:

> But here was Nature, sweeping toward him – unknowable, all-conquering, indifferent – and he saw in Her fires the futility of human pretensions.
>
> It was hard to breathe, or even to stand in the wind. The air was full of ash and grit and a terrible brilliance. He was choking, the pain across his chest was an iron band. He staggered backward.
>
> Face it, don't give in.
>
> Face it, like a Roman.
>
> The tide engulfed him (p. 337).

Moreover, Pliny is a *known* figure, fully present in the literary canon both through his own works and his nephew's letters. His appearance in such narratives is not confined to these recent novels: though seemingly unimportant to Bulwer-Lytton, Pliny was an important subject for a number of early creative responses to Pompeii, particularly in paintings such as Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes' *The Eruption of Vesuvius*; or, skewing things slightly by focusing on Pliny the Younger, *Pliny the Younger and his Mother at Misenum*, by Angelica Kauffman. Pliny the Elder's centrality is of course unsurprising in some ways, given how important the letters are and how vivid a picture they paint of his final hours. But there is more to it than just familiarity, I think: his appearance may also be a product of the uncertain and ambiguous responses that Pompeii and indeed Herculaneum have elicited since her rediscovery. For one, we know that her material presence was unsettling, especially to many early visitors. A disappointingly small, domestic settlement, unlike the monumental Rome, she was also littered with perverse images that subverted the previously held view of a pure, rational antiquity. Secondly, there was also an early sense of anxiety over her relative absence in the literary record, the body of evidence with perhaps the most cachet among gentlemen scholars. Hence the dissatisfaction felt by Winckelmann, Wordsworth and others that the scrolls in Herculaneum's Villa of the Papyri were mostly by Philodemus, and were not the lost works of Sophocles, a disappointment which Harris himself neatly alludes to, when his Pliny has arrived to rescue his friend Rectina, living at the Villa of the Papyri, and she urges him to save the library. So, feeling uncertain about what to do with Pompeii, how to make it grand and important, Pliny's association with it is perhaps a stroke of luck, one that is seized on by commentators, writers and artists. He becomes vital as a way of aggrandising Pompeii's story, yoking it to the Great Men of Roman history: he could not save the day on 24 August 79 – the library is lost, and Pliny himself succumbs, albeit heroically – but he becomes the go-to figure for those wishing to enhance Pompeii's importance, and its role in the literary record – and this continues today. Some might say that ancient literature is *still* privileged as the most prestigious way of accessing antiquity, even when we are at the ancient site which groans most heavily under a weight of material evidence.

We might also note here just how important, perhaps unexpectedly so, ancient literary evidence is to the children's novels by Caroline Lawrence, *The Secrets of Vesuvius* and *The Pirates of Pompeii*. Again, Pliny plays a key role as an avuncular figure, and much of the action plays out at the villa of Rectina, here wife of Pomponianus, and living at Stabiae, but with a 'second home' at Herculaneum. But there are other allusions that her young audience would be highly unlikely to recognise, such as the gift of a sparrow an admirer makes to one young lady, Miriam, which she then goes on to name Catullus. When investigating the ominous rumblings at Vesuvius, the children visit the villa's library hoping that Pliny's *Natural History* will provide some information on the mountain; when this is found wanting, it is in fact Diodorus Siculus, and his description of a 4th century earthquake at Helike which is referred to as evidence of what is about to befall them. And in *The Pirates of Pompeii*, the children are read part of a Homeric Hymn. Lawrence advertises her own research in this way and again underlines the importance of the literary tradition. This itself raises the question of how our historical novelists go about researching their narratives and, perhaps most interestingly, then advertising that research to their readers. It is notable that many of our most recent novelists do not declare their efforts particularly loudly, however hard they worked. Both Harris and Lawrence include short afterwords or acknowledgements, listing the key scholarship that they consulted. In contrast, Bulwer-Lytton littered his text with footnotes, asserting the authority of his research, and at times directly addressing his reader from within the main narrative itself, explaining his historical reconstructions in great detail, and often with reference to the archaeological

finds of the time. This has the striking effect of breaking the frame and in a sense collapsing the distance between past and present, and giving us the opportunity to think more directly about how one 'accesses' Pompeii and recreates it. This certainly seems to be a key concern of the 19th century, given that the two novellas by Gautier and Jensen, already mentioned, are also directly concerned with visiting the site, and the ways in which modern visitors try to make sense of what they see. This is a particularly fascinating way of engaging with the sites, and yet it is evidently not such a concern to many of our modern novelists, who seem much more concerned to preserve the illusion of a recreated antiquity, encouraging us to inhabit it wholly and without being explicitly reminded of the present.

Note

[1] See Wyke 1997, pp. 147-182, for cinematic adaptations.

[2] See www.bulwer-lytton.com.

[3] Leppmann 1966, p. 173.

[4] Rocchi 2008.

[5] http://histmyst.org/chron.html.

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"A city famed throughout the world": Pompeii in 20th and 21st century fiction

Over the 250 years since Pompeii was rediscovered, her reception in the popular imagination has, for much of that time, been dominated by the presence of one particular novel. Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) attracted a massive worldwide audience and inspired numerous other receptions of the city and the disaster that befell her, including paintings, theatre and film. But though scholars retain an interest in his role in Pompeii's reception history, the wider cultural impact of his florid and little-read melodrama is now negligible. What happened, then, to Pompeii in contemporary fiction in the 20th century and beyond? Could anyone replace Bulwer-Lytton? (Would they even want to?) In the 1960s, Wolfgang Leppmann feared that 'one might [...] consider as closed the development of a literary tradition which could properly be called Pompeian' (*Pompeii in Fact and Fiction*, 1966, p. 173). Now, though, the accumulation of fiction concerning Pompeii published since the mid 20th century demands our attention. This paper (necessarily selectively) will consider some of the key titles to have emerged, showing how these novels both repeat the trends of earlier receptions, and offer new routes into Pompeii's significance in the modern world.

Modern encounters with the Vesuvian cities typically reflect either the urge to reconstruct and revisit the city 'as it was', or the equally seductive pull of its ghostly ruins (and sometimes both at once); similar impulses shape the recent development of Pompeian fictions. Firstly, novels which recreate the city, notably Robert Harris's *Pompeii* (2003), and their attempts to both maintain and reject the Victorian tradition, will be considered. Titles such as Lindsey Davis's *Shadows in Bronze* (1990) and Caroline Lawrence's *Roman Mysteries* series (2002), which counteract the fatalistic, (near-)inevitability of the story's ending by employing suspenseful detective stories (as, indeed, does Harris), will also be explored, alongside Pompeii's appeal as setting for erotic fiction. Secondly, the paper will examine those stories which deal with modern experiences of the site: Malcolm Lowry's *The Present Estate of Pompeii* (1961), Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover* (1992), and Mark Gatiss's *The Vesuvius Club* (2005), whilst not fictionalising the ancient city itself, are no less powerful and evocative in their attempts to articulate what the city in ruins has meant for visitors from the 18th century to the present day. Finally, there are those works that unsettle us and subvert our expectations, as Pompeii herself can so easily do, by using devices such as time-travel (itself central to 19th century Pompeian novellas by Gautier and Jensen, but given new impetus by a work such as Amélie Nothomb's *Péplum* [1996]) or blending fact and fiction, as in Butterworth and Laurence's *Pompeii: The Living City* (2005).

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