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Telling ghost stories

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Mary Beard

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Reviewer:

Judith Harris

Pompeii is the quintessential ghost story, frequently told by archaeological and literary scribes working together in symbiosis, not always for the good. In this multitude of ghost raconteurs novelist Robert Harris stands tall. With scientific aid and comfort from two of the world's foremost British Pompeianists,

archaeologist Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and classicist Mary Beard, both of Cambridge, Harris wrote the novel *Pompeii*, published by Random House in 2003. Its enormous popular success brings further rewards, for director Paul W. S. Anderson is making Harris's own screenplay of the novel into a \$130 million TV series for release in 2012. For all intents and purposes, therefore, Robert Harris's *Pompeii is Pompeii* for the public worldwide, and what he has seen in Pompeii, or thought he has seen, is what the world will see.

Harris wisely bypassed the complexity of the site, with its seven centuries or so of existence, its confusing mixture of cultural sources and languages (Oscan, Greek, Etruscan, Samnite, Roman and Hellenised Roman), and above all the totality of a city entirely sealed as if in amber. Instead, in his novel Harris chose to narrow his exploration of Pompeian antiquity to showing the Roman engineering marvel of construction and maintenance of aqueducts, against the raw dramatic background of the eruption, not coincidentally a fine occasion for an exciting literary and television romp. In a welcome technical aside, the hydraulic engineer who is the hero of the story speaks of placing his faith, not in gods who hurl thunderbolts, "but in the daily miracle that came from mixing two parts of slaked lime to five parts of puteolanum" the local red sand "conjuring up a substance that would set underwater with a consistency harder than rock". Following this recipe for the cement that kickstarted Roman construction on the grand scale, Harris throws in an elegant quote from Virgil. In narrowing his field of observation to little more than this, what he therefore offers is a primer to Pompeian, which is to say Roman, life, and an inspiring point of departure for those interested in seeing the site and in reading further.

When he strays farther afield he occasionally makes irritating, if innocuous, errors, such as mention of a boat that ferried passengers "daily" from Roman Ostia to Pompeii, a journey of 240 km. Overland it required three days at least, to cite no less an authority than Mary Beard; sailors would never count on making that journey, which depended upon wind and wave, in just one day. For any author, to recreate chit-chat in an ancient language is difficult, and many of Harris's folksy phrases grate, like the reiterated "fuck" this and "fuck" that, and the constant sexual innuendo intended as rough-guy camaraderie ("maybe he'll stop playing with himself?"). One ponders over his sources. His plucky young female heroine, who dashes up Mount Vesuvius at night on horseback to provide the hero with compromising evidence against corrupt evil-doers, might just have stepped off the wuthering moors. His characters dine off Trimalchio while sloshing down the wine like the British football fans I've seen on Via del Corso in Rome. Others are as fey as the toffs out of P. G. Wodehouse:

The slave had shuffled up beside him, carrying a tray, in the center of which stood a large goblet of clear glass, three-quarters full. Pliny grunted and lifted the wine to the candlelight.

"A Caecuban," whispered Pomponianus in awe. "Forty years old and still drinking beautifully." He ran his tongue round his fat lips. "I wouldn't mind another glass myself, Pliny?".⁽¹⁾

Another Harris novel has already been made into a successful movie. This was, significantly, *The Ghost*. Its non-fictional background was the election night in London in May of 1997, when Robert Harris, at the time crack political commentator of *The Sunday Times*, was the lone journalist at the side of the triumphant Tony Blair at Labour party headquarters as results poured in. Within a decade of that victory, Harris, the former insider reporter who was by then a best-selling author, had become disenchanted, particularly after the Prime Minister supported the US invasion of Iraq. In *The Ghost*, written at lightning speed in less than six months, Harris unleashed bolts of wrath, Jove-like, against a thinly disguised Blair. The narrator of the novel is a ghost writer who has been summoned to mist-wrapped Cape Cod (get it?) to write what is meant to be a best-selling autobiography of a British Prime Minister, who otherwise risks becoming a ghost because newly out of power. Admitted into the retired PM's inner circle, the narrator first discovers that his predecessor as ghost writer died under mysterious circumstances, thus becoming a ghost. Then he realizes that his subject is a cad, and finally takes on board that he himself is at risk of becoming the ghost of a ghost writer.

In 2007 Colin Greenland, a reviewer for the *Guardian*, compared the narrative conceit of a ghost writer

telling the story to having the scribe Tiro relate the life and times of Marcus Tullius Cicero in a novel called *Imperium*, written by, guess who, Robert Harris. To summarise, then, armed with notebook and ballpoint pen, the real Harris, a reporter, had been the unobserved observer at the real Blair's side. Armed with a typewriter, a ghost writer had been the unobserved observer at the side of the Blair clone. And armed with wax tablet and stylus, the invented scribe Tiro became Harris's unobserved observer of an imagined Cicero.

In this game of ghostly semi-fictitious presences, what is there of truth? Reviewer Greenland, for one, put down *The Ghost* as 'an imaginative impertinence, an accusation [against Blair] that no one could make or take literally?'. And yet, bristling with vitality and intelligence, *The Ghost* seems to capture what may not necessarily be literal truth about the Blair world, yet nevertheless appears to be a kind of insightful truth.

The problem is that to tell the 'truth' about Pompeii, and to offer genuine insights into Pompeian life, presents a far greater challenge. In that impertinence, many have tried and failed, and the early archaeologists who attempted to recreate the lives of the people who once lived, loved, feasted, conducted business in and died in Pompeii made errors that today bring a smile. Only the most notorious was the conclusion that the framed bright red phallus painted on a wall with the words *HIC HABITAT FELICITAS* indicated that the building under excavation was a brothel. Digging further, archaeologists found grinding mills which proved that the building, later called the House of Pansa, was a bakery, and that the phallus was a good-luck charm. In my 1852 edition of William Gell's *Pompeiana* a sketch of that phallus is coyly unrecognizable, but, as a footnote points out in Latin, '*membra genitalia ? incrementis frugum et pecudum?*'.

Archaeologists, of course, are not the sole responsible for errors. Archaeologist John R. Clarke, the author of *Looking at Lovemaking* and *Looking at Laughter*, has painstakingly documented how building contractors in the 1970's arbitrarily tacked fresco fragments onto ceilings and walls at Oplontis, the town near Pompeii where the so-called Villa of Poppaea was being over-enthusiastically restored to serve as a tourist attraction.

Gell himself, who represented London's Society of Dilettanti and kept a house in Naples, showed Pompeii to the politician-cum-novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The result was Lord Lytton's fictitious *The Last Days of Pompeii*, published in 1834 and widely translated. Since that time no vision of Pompeii has been more influential in films and fiction. Even Harris has a blind youth 'the equivalent of Lytton's blind flower seller Nydia' accompany the young waterworks engineer through the streets of Pompeii.

The quintessential meeting that brought together archaeologist-architect Gell and novelist Lytton illustrates how the painting of notions upon the ghostly canvas of Pompeii occurs through the cross-fertilization of fantasy and science. What they do not show is where the one begins and the other ends. In her fascinating *Resurrecting Pompeii*, Australian forensic archaeologist Estelle Lazer, who spent seven field seasons working on the human skeletal remains of Pompeii, demonstrates 'that the skeletal positions which Bulwer-Lytton employed as descriptive evidence for the lives of his characters was so evocative that his romantic imaginings have been invoked as scientific evidence in forensic analyses which survived into our own day' (her words).

This does not occur solely in archaeology, of course. In this same way, new studies show that police fingerprint analysts tend to read into their microscopes identifications which had been previously suggested to them. At Pompeii, a number of full skeletal bodies were given flesh and moral qualities like heroism, while other, non-evocative skeletal remains were simply tossed aside. For many decades bones were heaped into spider- and animal-infested mounds, and abandoned, which meant their loss of provenance. The emotional impact to viewers when they saw the body casts overshadowed science.

'The seduction of scholarship by popular culture was one of the key factors that contributed to the neglect of skeletal material as an archaeological resource?', Lazer concludes.⁽²⁾ In short, fiction had determined and undermined fact, with the result that 'Pompeian skeletal remains were not initially seen to have any research potential. They served merely as props for the creation of visual or verbal vignettes for visiting dignitaries or literary works, like those of Gautier and Bulwer-Lytton?.'

If Lazer's is a work of pure scientific archaeology and as such of interest primarily to specialists, Mary Beard's *Pompeii, the Life of a Roman Town* (published in the US as *The Fires of Vesuvius, Pompeii Lost and Found*) successfully merges the serious touchstones of classicism and archaeology with the no less important imaginative work of reconstructing life and lives in the deep past. Beard, who is a professor of classics at Cambridge University and classics editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, can be challenged on a point or two. She occasionally debunks for the sake of debunking; for instance, experts today challenge her assertion that the eruption took place in November or December, rather than in August. She avowed this theory on grounds that warm clothing and dried fruits, not harvested yet in August, were found, but persuasive arguments countering both these notions exist.

But to her credit this Cambridge don takes the trouble to spell out all the versions debated by archaeologists. In discussing the same aqueduct system described 'more or less accurately' in Harris's book (her words), she writes that,

Something must have gone wrong with this system of supply on the eve of the eruption. For it is clear from the empty trenches filled with volcanic debris that, at the time of its destruction, the pavements in various places in the city had been dug up and the water pipes removed. Most likely this was an instant attempt to investigate and repair the damage done to the water system by earthquakes that occurred in the run-up to the final eruption.(3)

But then she typically goes on to explain more, including doubts about what is visible to archaeologists. It is this care that sets her book above others on the market today, and makes it of particular interest:

Archaeologists have speculated that similar problems might explain why, down one back alley (running beside the House of the Chaste Lovers and the House of the Painters at Work), the cess pits filled by the domestic latrines had been dug up and their contents left piled up unsalubriously in the pathway when the disaster struck. Though why seismic movements should affect the operation of cesspits is less clear. Perhaps this is more of an indication of the regular state of a Pompeian backstreet.(4)

In writing of the economy, she explains why trade, despite its being the very essence of Pompeii, was 'a very thin icing on the [Roman] economic cake, small-scale and not particularly respectable,' and then takes care to explain precisely why one has difficulty in being precise about how it functioned, for:

Rome developed none of the financial institutions needed to support a sophisticated economy. There was limited 'banking', as we shall see, in Pompeii. It is not even clear if there were such things as credit notes, or if you wheeled around a load of coins in a wheelbarrow to make large purchases, such as houses.(5)

She observes the same caution in describing a painting of the mythical Pero breast-feeding her starving father Micon found in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, along with verses celebrating modesty (*pudor*) and piety (*pietas*). Some archaeologists, she writes, have thought this an apt decoration for a child's bedroom ('a strange choice, if you ask me?'), and suggests that the image may contain a more specific 'political resonance?'.(6)

In this pleasantly readable, extraordinarily comprehensive and wide-ranging book, Beard, perhaps because she is a classicist treading on the turf of other scholars (the archaeologists), succeeds in writing in a manner that is invariably interesting for both scholars and for those who are, like me, the voyeurs of archaeology.

Notes

1. Robert Harris, *Pompeii* (London, 2003), p. 1.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Estelle Lazer, *Resurrecting Pompeii* (London, 2009), p. 100.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Beard, *Ibid*, p. 64.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Beard, *Ibid.*, p. 64.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Beard, *Op. cit.*, p. 154.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Beard, *Op. cit.*, p. 146.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/sep/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview24> [3]

Guardian (condensed)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2003/sep/22/digestedread.theeditorpressreview7> [4]

Guardian (interview with Mary Beard)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/24/classics> [5]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/queen-of-the-underworld-mary-beard-is-bringing-the-ancient-city-of-pompeii-to-life-in-a-bbc-documentary-2154808.html> [6]

Telegraph

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non_fictionreviews/3560953/Review-Pompeii-by-Mary-Beard.html [7]

Authortrek

<http://authortrek.com/blog/tag/mary-beard-pompeii/> [8]

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[6] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/queen-of-the-underworld-mary-beard-is-bringing-the-ancient-city-of-pompeii-to-life-in-a-bbc-documentary-2154808.html>

[7] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non_fictionreviews/3560953/Review-Pompeii-by-Mary-Beard.html

[8] <http://authortrek.com/blog/tag/mary-beard-pompeii/>