



Pompeii: A Novel

By Robert Harris

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All along the Mediterranean coast, the Roman empire's richest citizens are relaxing in their luxurious villas, enjoying the last days of summer. The world's largest navy lies peacefully at anchor in Misenum. The tourists are spending their money in the seaside resorts of Baiae, Herculaneum, and Pompeii.

But the carefree lifestyle and gorgeous weather belie an impending cataclysm, and only one man is worried. The young engineer Marcus Attilius Primus has just taken charge of the Aqua Augusta, the enormous aqueduct that brings fresh water to a quarter of a million people in nine towns around the Bay of Naples. His predecessor has disappeared. Springs are failing for the first time in generations. And now there is a crisis on the Augusta's sixty-mile main line—somewhere to the north of Pompeii, on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius.

Attilius—decent, practical, and incorruptible—promises Pliny, the famous scholar who commands the navy, that he can repair the aqueduct before the reservoir runs dry. His plan is to travel to Pompeii and put together an expedition, then head out to the place where he believes the fault lies. But Pompeii proves to be a corrupt and violent town, and Attilius soon discovers that there are powerful forces at work—both natural and man-made—threatening to destroy him.

With his trademark elegance and intelligence, Robert Harris, bestselling author of **Archangel** and **Fatherland**, re-creates a world on the brink of disaster.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this fine historical by British novelist Harris (*Archangel*; *Enigma*; *Fatherland*), an upstanding Roman engineer rushes to repair an aqueduct in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, which, in A.D. 79, is getting ready to blow its top. Young Marcus Attilius Primus becomes the aquarius of the great Aqua Augusta when its former chief engineer disappears after 20 years on the job. When water flow to the coastal town of Misenum is interrupted, Attilius convinces the admiral of the Roman fleet—the scholar Pliny the Elder—to give him a fast ship to Pompeii, where he finds the source of the problem in a burst sluiceway. Lively writing, convincing but economical period details and plenty of intrigue keep the pace quick, as Attilius meets Corelia, the defiant daughter of a vile real estate speculator, who supplies him with documents implicating her father and Attilius's predecessor in a water embezzlement scheme. Attilius has bigger worries, though: a climb up Vesuvius reveals that an eruption is imminent. Before he can warn anyone, he's ambushed by the double-crossing foreman of his team, Corvax, and a furious chase ensues. As the volcano spews hot ash, Attilius fights his way back to Pompeii in an attempt to rescue Corelia. Attilius, while possessed of certain modern attitudes and a respect for empirical observation, is no anachronism. He even sends Corelia back to her cruel father at one point, advising her to accept her fate as a woman. Harris's volcanology is well researched, and the plot, while decidedly secondary to the expertly rendered historic spectacle, keeps this impressive novel moving along toward its exciting finale.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School--With detailed examination of time, place, and circumstance, Harris brings to life first-century Pompeii and its surroundings. Vesuvius, a sleeping giant, towers over the Bay of Naples while the citizenry frets over a drought that is threatening the water supply. Marcus Attilius Primus, the new chief engineer for the huge aqueduct that supplies the area, is summoned by Corelia, beautiful daughter of the powerful and corrupt Ampliatus, to investigate a fish kill in their villa's pool, fed by the aqueduct. Attilius discovers that the bay's water supply is diminishing rapidly and is contaminated with sulfur. Youthful, upright Attilius vows to Pliny, famous scholar and admiral in charge of the huge fleet based there, to repair the damaged aqueduct in two days. Meanwhile, tremors are felt in Pompeii, and the populace fears that the god Vulcan is angry and may send another earthquake, such as occurred 17 years earlier. Attilius is successful, but the air, now filled with a fine gray dust, begins to rain pumice, and Vesuvius unleashes its fury. As the populace flees, he turns back to rescue Corelia, trapped in Pompeii, and the aqueduct he knows so well becomes their salvation. This story of a corrupt, violent society focused on its own pleasure, set against the fascinating history of a familiar catastrophe, makes for a compelling drama.--*Molly Connally, Chantilly Regional Library, VA*

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Harris's historical novel begins in August, 79 B.C., two days before the eruption of Vesuvius. The hero is Marcus Attilius Primus, an aqueduct engineer who is investigating a mysterious blockage, apparently related to recent tremors, in the aqueduct that runs from Misenum to Pompeii. In addition to landing this prestigious job—it's the Empire's longest aqueduct—he has met a young woman who has the "same darkness of hair" and the "same voluptuousness of figure" as his dear departed first wife. The only problem is her father, a corrupt and powerful millionaire who is stealing from the water supply. Although the plot seems to owe more to "Chinatown" than to Pliny, Harris garnishes the action with seductive period detail, and the novel comes alive in the main event, a cataclysmic explosion with a thermal energy equal to a hundred thousand

Hiroshimas.

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Users Review

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