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Fools for Lava

The timeless beauty, and obvious danger of Mount Vesuvius.

Amy Henderson

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Two million people live in the shadows of Mount Vesuvius, serenely confident that mainland Europe's most active volcano will not choose any time soon to blow its lid. Their proximity is an astonishing act of faith. They must spend their evenings singing "On Top of Old Smokey" and "You're the Top." Are their libraries filled with stories about Mt. Kilimanjaro, Magic Mountains, and Shangri-Las?

Vesuvius is the latest in Harvard University Press's Wonders of the World series. Focusing on sites that have achieved iconic stature "and are loaded with a fair amount of mythological baggage," the series includes studies of *Stonehenge*, *The Colosseum*, and *The Roman Forum*. Gillian Darley, a broadcaster and architectural journalist, has a combination of interests that make her a natural for this work on Vesuvius.

To begin, she describes herself as curious about the interaction between past and present with people, buildings, and places. She is also familiar with chronicling a life history, having previously published biographies of Octavia Hill (1990), John Soane (2000), and John Evelyn (2006). With *Vesuvius*, Darley has deployed her skills to write a lively biography of the mountain best known for swallowing Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 a.d.—a catastrophe emblazoned in history by Pliny the Younger's famous account of the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who, as commander of a fleet of warships, was lost as he attempted to rescue people desperately fleeing the 100-mile-an-hour volcanic cloud that engulfed all in its path.

Vesuvius has had eight major eruptions; dormant for 600 years after 1037, it reawakened with a bang in 1631, killing 4,000 people with its smoke and ash. The volcano was last heard from in 1944, when it forced Allied troops to evacuate an airbase as ash and rocks rained down and destroyed fighter planes.

This mountain and its effluvia attracted vivid attention even before Pliny's time, and *Vesuvius* is an entertaining guide to the volcano's impact on European culture, ranging over its influence on religion, science, philosophy, art, literature, and music. Darley's cultural archaeology has unearthed written records about Vesuvius beginning with Vitruvius (circa 15 b.c.), who described the volcano's "kind of powder" which, when mixed with lime and rubble, became so impregnable that "neither the waves nor the force of water can dissolve them." Plutarch describes how Spartacus and his small slave army of 100 gladiators hid in its crater before cascading down its slopes to surprise 3,000 enemy soldiers below. Early Christians pondered the religious implications of the mountain's eruptions: To what extent were the fires of the earth linked to the fires of hell? Later, in an age devoted to rationalism and natural philosophy, the mountain was seen as a natural wonder worthy of careful observation and description.

The mountain's 17th-century eruption catalyzed a fascination by that century's philosophers and natural scientists, many of whom flocked to the volcano's rim to experience its wonder for themselves. The Fellows of the Royal Society, including Robert Boyle, Joseph Addison, and George (later, Bishop) Berkeley, filled the society's *Transactions* with fervent, bodice-ripping descriptions. An enraptured Berkeley teetered on the very edge of the crater to see "a vast aperture full of smoke. . . . I heard within that horrid gulf certain odd sounds, which seemed to proceed from the belly of the mountain: a sort of murmuring, sighing, throbbing, churning . . . and between whiles a noise like that of thunder or cannon."

Darley's discussion of the Romantic response to Vesuvius is perhaps her most engaging. If natural philosophers had used the volcano to extrapolate a "handy manual to the mysteries of the earth," the mountain was embraced by the Romantics as "a key to the complexities of the psyche." The volcano's suppressed violence became "a metaphor for the conflicted soul as much as for revolution and radical political thought."

Eighteenth-century notions of the sublime had focused on Vesuvius as a phenomenon of nature's terror; for example, Edmund Burke (1757) described Vesuvius as fulfilling the Sublime's extremes of both Fire and Ice. For the Romantics of the 19th century, however, Darley relates how Vesuvius exhibited the intensity of experience. Shelley wrote that Vesuvius offered "the most impressive exhibition of the energies of nature I ever saw," its beauty residing in its "character of tremendous and irresistible strength." Walking to the rim, he described the sight as "the most horrible chaos that can be imagined." Darley calls the volcanic landscape "a fittingly cathartic auditorium in which the author of *Prometheus Unbound* could watch the theater of Nature." It was Nature as supreme melodrama.

Other Romantic artists were similarly affected. Darley gives such examples as J. M. W. Turner, whose first view of Vesuvius in 1819 transformed his earlier imagined ideas about erupting volcanoes. Vesuvius also proved perfect dramatic fodder for opera, as exemplified by the set design for an 1815 production of *The Magic Flute*, which featured a glowering Vesuvius as the backdrop for Act One. Most popular of all was Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which in the mid-1830s created an enormous groundswell for Vesuvius and the notion of "doomed glamour."

Darley's chronicle showcases how Vesuvius has been viewed, over time, as a site potentially holding the secrets of the universe. It is a perspective compatible with the hypothesis expressed in the 20th century by the late anthropologist Stephen Jay Gould, who posited that, from Pliny onward, the idea had taken root that the earth was "ruled by sudden cataclysms that rupture episodes of quiescence and mark the dawn of a new order."

In the 20th century, Vesuvius was embraced by the new order of popular culture. A 1908 movie drew crowds to watch the dramatic doom of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, while Thomas Cook & Sons sold tickets for funicular rides to the crater and built a convenient hotel nearby so that visitors could experience "the wonderful air, both transparent and pure." The Italian song "Funiculi, Funicula" resonated in parlors and concert halls around the world and remains a popular operatic encore to this day.

Of course, the question remains: Why do people live on the mountain? Darley muses how, since the 1944 eruption, "a demonic game of grandmother's footsteps has been going on, in which the population creeps ever higher and nearer to the old lava fields, seeming to tempt Vesuvius not to turn without warning and devour everything in its path." Urbanization has swamped the mountainside, and the lower slopes are now "matted by a dense web of illegal buildings—commercial and retail, residential and even public amenities." There is an oil refinery and a hospital.

At least on paper, a "National Disaster Plan" outlines a cascading system of emergency command for the next eruption—a catastrophe in which between 650,000 and 3.1 million people will be put at risk. Meanwhile, Vesuvius sends up gentle little wisps of steam, and the band plays on.

Amy Henderson is a cultural historian and curator in Washington.

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