



Ghosts of Vesuvius

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A fascinating look at Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Vesuvius eruption in comparison with other historically significant volcanic eruptions, including the World Trade Center disaster.

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, which obliterated the Roman towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, was a disaster that resounds to this day. Now palaeontologist Charles Pellegrino presents a wealth of new knowledge about the doomed towns – and brings to vivid life the people, their last moments, and the aftermath.

The lessons learned from modern scrutiny of that ancient eruption produce disturbing echoes in the present. Dr Pellegrino, who worked at Ground Zero in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, shares his unique knowledge of the strange physics of volcanic 'downblast' and 'collapse column', drawing a direct link from past to present, and providing readers with a poignant glimpse into the last moments of the 'American Vesuvius'.

Ghosts of Vesuvius Details

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Author : Charles Pellegrino

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From Reader Review Ghosts of Vesuvius for online ebook

Teejay says

The contest for "May favorite book ever" is a narrow one, between this and "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance".

If you read no other book this decade, please read this one. Pellegrino takes us on a journey through time, space, chemistry, geology, cosmology, biology, politics, religion, history, and the human condition. And he does so in such a natural and unforced fashion, you never realize (or care) that you have diverged from the topic of Pompeii and Herculaneum, until he steers you back there. And through the entire voyage, you're hanging on every word. An absolutely FANTASTIC read.

Grindy Stone says

This book is all over the place, very much like one of those general science books by Asimov or Sagan. Unlike his predecessors, Pellegrino tries to tie all the general science together. I don't understand the destination he left me at, but the journey was pretty good.

Amanda says

I liked bits and pieces of it, but I thought it could definitely use some more organizing. Most of it is quite confusing and pretty much all over the place.

M. D. Hudson says

I just don't like optimistic, future-oriented, prolix science writers. Never have. Don't like Isaac Asimov and don't like Carl Sagan. Better living through rockets and Outer Space and chemistry. Even when they are talking of calamities, they are still insisting on how great everything is and how much better it can be if we just set our gazes and grins towards the nebulae of our better selves. To infinity and beyond! Pellegrino is one of these guys and he is also a scientist historian of the "popular" sort. I love popular history (what choice do I have; a 500 page dissertation on the importance of portages on the upper Mississippi River, 1750-1780?). But all the problems I have with popular histories are embodied here: bad writing and authorial preening. Add, in the case of Pellegrino's "Ghosts of Venus" some spotty organization, and you have a pretty bad book in many, many ways.

However, many popular histories can be saved by their subject matter, and that is, to some extent, the case here - I couldn't put the lousy thing down. Basically, what this book tries to be is one of those "connections" sort of things perfected by James Burke wherein history, culture, science, religion and a bunch of neat-o facts are shown as being interrelated. Not to sound dismissive - I really like this kind of stuff (and I am a big fan of Burke's). But Burke knew how to let the facts do the speaking and avoided inserting his own flapdoodle in the telling. Pellegrino loves the sound of his own Big Thoughts. This manifests itself in some of the most breathless prose I have ever encountered - Pellegrino loves the rumble of his own profundity and he will frequently cause him wax poetic in fragments, sometimes in parentheses and italics (the second line below is italicized):

But Earth has never been static --
(Earth abides--)
(p. 274)

He does this mostly when he is mulling over the New Testament and the deep spooky mysteries of the Gnostics, topics of endless fascination for Pellegrino and neither having much to do with the book overall except that Big Connections are being made therefore the Earth abides etc.

Perhaps worse than the profound fragments are his longer prose gassings:

In time-present, with more than two-thirds of Herculaneum still sealed in rock and unexplored, we cannot help but wonder how many similar mysteries wait to be discovered. The story of those last days is one that deserves to be reexplored, resolved more clearly, and told anew in every generation, lest we fail to remember whence we came, where we are going, and the sway that fate and random chance hold over us." "(p. 282)

Down there, in the shallows of times backward abyss; down there in Pompeii's "Number 11 House," archaeology's first physical appearance of the word Christianos wades us into the deeps of empire and enigma." (p. 337)

So how can we "remember" where we are going? But even beyond not making sense, a little of this kind of profound rumbling goes a long way. Add to it Pellegrino's shameless name-dropping (Cameron Crow, Michael Crichton, Asimov, etc.) and the exciting adventures he's been on (submersible visits to the Titanic!), and the kitschy way he proposed to his wife (message-in-a-bottle via "Squid Mail") which he felt compelled to mention and this book can be a pretty tough slog. Two hundred years ago, Pellegrino would've been a clergyman of the sort Jane Austen liked to ridicule - at one point he goes on to describe making a Christian Cross out of a chunk of RMS Titanic's rail. The self-satisfied piousness of this combined with a kind of spiritual vacuity that is hard to describe: a cheap ecumenical gesture combined with Science as Religion dosed with Philosophical Deep Thoughts topped with narcissistic frosting? Whatever it is, were I a Titanic victim, I'd be haunting his ass now.

However, I am almost ashamed to say that I couldn't put this book down. When he is not gushing or bragging or waxing philosophical, Pellegrino has a talent for passing on information. He gives one of the most engaging Timelines of the Universe I have ever read, and his descriptions of the destruction of Pompeii/Herculaneum and the Twin Towers are quite informative despite the gusts of Deep Thoughts wafting through the history and science. His long, long aside on Gnosticism and the Tomb of Jesus was tiresome and seemed far too sure of itself and, oddly enough for all his Love of All Things Scientific, told with the fervor of a True Believer. But when he sticks to the mechanics of destruction (volcanoes, asteroids, and terrorists) he is quite engaging.

PWRL says

SM

Rebecca says

I loved how rambly it was. I think that was one of its strengths. I didn't get the impression it was meant to be

a scientific monograph so I didn't judge it as lacking in that respect. On the other hand it was very informative and I felt, after putting it down, I'd learned a lot. The stuff about the shock wave was fascinating, especially applied to the twin towers collapse hypothesis.

devon says

I don't do science. And I shy away from non-fiction. But Pellegrino is a moving writer, and has the dark jaded view of the universe that only a scientist of ancient volcanoes and even more ancient universe formations can possess. Hope is hard to find, but it is there, and the book quietly reflects the connections we all try to make between the past and the present, from Vesuvius to September 11, and our own lives with that of our universe.

Taylor says

This book combines the science of stars, the history of Pompeii, and present day 9/11 in a fantastical journey to the heart of what it means to be a fragile human in a dangerous world of incredible hidden power. It manages to combine science and history, my two favorite book topics together in a way that made me want to read all of Pellegrino's books.

Nisha says

Masterfully written in a deliberate web, showing the connections among 9/11, Vesuvius, Titanic, and a host of other world-changing events. Not a book for a linear reader. Fascinating and a little scary, but one of the best books I've read in a long time.

Patricia Swenson says

Fascinating. So interesting to learn about the forces involved in the destruction. And to learn about the shock cocoons and WHAT and who survived in them.

Krelnsk says

A bit rambly with some florid prose, but a gripping read touching on many of my interests. So in my opinion it's a good book. He tells us its about strange connections in the title, and some of them take a while in the telling. The author is a proclaimed agnostic but I find much faith and light seeps out, intentionally or not.

Joe says

"All this has happened before, and all this will happen again."

A fascinating look at the similarities and connections between historical events from ancient Rome, through the founding of the United States, the sinking of the Titanic, and the attack on the World Trade Center.

The individual analysis of historic events is by itself quite fascinating, but when you start to see the connections and influences across time things really get interesting. While certainly not light reading, it's not so deep or technical that someone with an interest couldn't get through it. I would absolutely recommend it to anyone looking to develop their view of history and historical events.

Cari says

The origins of the universe, the solar system, the earth, and how life evolved on said Earth is all very interesting...but when the first one hundred and twenty pages of a book about Vesuvius, Pompeii, and connections through history to the fall of the Towers are about said development of the Universe as we know it, I start to feel a bit misled. A hefty chapter or two specifically focusing on the way the planet developed and how shifting plates and geology all come together in relation to volcanoes - that I would have been able to understand. But taking over a fifth of the book to tell me about how life on this planet went from tiny, unrecognizable organisms to their current form, or to plot out the position of the stars in the Big Dipper a billion years ago? Not only was that entirely irrelevant, it also seemed more like bragging, showing off knowledge while rambling. Stick to the point, Mr. Pellegrino, and talk about what you promised when I picked up the book.

And my oh my, Mr. Pellegrino is very proud of himself, isn't he? Another reviewer mentioned this, and I whole-heartedly agree: there is too much "I" in this book. Academic studies are supposed to limit the personal pronouns, and the author doesn't have the sly wit required to pull off the rambling diversions from the point of the book or the stories he randomly tells about his own adventures. (I swear to God, he even keeps mentioning his cat. Charles, seriously, what the hell do I give a damn about your cat?) I don't care that the author once, in the midst of testing currents in the ocean, put a message in a bottle, tossed it into the sea, and proposed marriage that way. It has nothing to do with Vesuvius, Pompeii, the Towers falling, or any other "strange connections."

I could have done without the near-constant name-dropping, too. Big names in the fields whom the author either worked with or once talked to or wants to be seen having a connection to: Gould, Sagan, etc. After awhile, the author just started sounding like that blow-hard at the fancy party who, in the guise of telling you an interesting historical story, is actually taking the opportunity to talk nonstop about himself. And it got irritating, to the point where it ruined the book for me.

Which is unfortunate, because when he did drop the "I" sentences and actually talked about the eruption of Vesuvius and how each successive surge destroyed the surrounding towns, the book was incredibly interesting. Those parts were well-written, packed with information, and almost chilling with their detail. The history leading up to and immediately following the eruption was also engrossing, very well told. And the way he relates the finds of the archaeological teams that have been slowly uncovering Pompeii and her sister city? Amazing. You can picture the fossilized remains of the slave girl cradling the baby from the blast. You can see the brother, crippled by polio, and his attending sister, forever locked in ash together, whole families dying together because one member couldn't be evacuated. Absolutely mesmerizing.

Alas, those parts did not make up the bulk of this book, and it's now in the "sell to the used book store" box, because it's not worth the space on my shelf.

Kirsten McKenzie says

A tough one to review. More a 3.5 stars than 3 stars. I skim read the first 100 pages, which were filled with oodles of scientific information about volcanoes through the ages, and their impact on earth. After that, there were about 100+ pages of fascinating historical insights in Pompeii, including plenty of evidence about the population and their religious leanings, and how things happening elsewhere in the Roman empire impacted on the residents of Pompeii. The rest of the book dealt with parallels between the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the explosion of Mt Vesuvius, with plenty of examples from New York. To be honest, I skimmed those pages as well. The data was fascinating, but I was reading the book more for the Pompeii side of things. Hence why I feel a little bad only scoring 3.5 stars. If scientific data is your thing, then you will LOVE this book. If you enjoy historical insights and social commentary, then you'll love part of this book - this part was exceptional. I just wish the whole book was like this!

Ian Mathers says

"The oldest known diamonds on Earth are only a few molecule layers thick, so small and so numerous that anyone who has worked with the Genesis Stone presently exhales diamonds with every breath, and will continue to do so for the rest of their lives."

"Between A.D. 30 and 79, prophets were murdered, a holy city burned, a mountain exploded; and history swerved, sending forth a cascade of consequences, like ripples through time."

To say this is a book about Vesuvius, or even a book about Vesuvius and 9/11, or even a book about Vesuvius, 9/11, and the *Titanic*, doesn't do it justice. It's a book about science, and wonder, and mystery, and context, and terrifyingly deep time, and art, and human nature, and morality, and astrophysics. It's also, frequently and I admit sometimes gratingly, sometimes a book about how cool Charles Pellegrino's life has been. It's a book where the closing notes of hope, which I think would have landed very differently in 2004, unfortunately have aged the poorest of all the insights or claims here. It's also a book with frequent flights of conjecture and/or fancy, frequently laden with portent. It's one that seems almost designed to generate mixed reviews, just because it's such a potent and sometimes (or for some readers) ridiculous mix that it's probably either going to really work or *really* not work for you.

Yes, it's also jam packed with really fascinating information about volcanos, the three disasters mentioned above, history, science, etc etc etc., but there are plenty of books that could just give you information. If *Ghosts of Vesuvius* is going to work for you, it's probably because even when you find Pellegrino's authorial voice a bit silly, you still get swept up in it. I certainly was. I don't agree with every little claim or tangent, but the number of times I felt like my mind and understanding was expanding as I read through parts of this are worth any number of little infelicities. There are bits of this book I still think about regularly, and it's one I definitely need to reread in the future, to see where it hits me then. Not for everyone, but unlike almost anything else I've read, and worth checking it out just in case it turns out you do tune into its wavelength.
