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Gregory S. Bucher

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# Classical Literature for Modern Children: Books about the Roman World

BY GREGORY S. BUCHER

**T**he ancient world has always been an object of fascination to me. Just as with my experience, a child's fascination with Roman soldiers and gladiators (and half-remembered chariot races from *Ben Hur*) can develop, with exposure and over time, into a more mature understanding that the literature and material culture of ancient Rome are not only spectacular and fun but relevant to our society as well. One key way that ancient cultures can mediate learning is by presenting familiar problems (slavery, poverty, class differences, choices in types of role models, and much more) in a society different and remote from our own to permit frank discussion without offending anyone. In many cases, the differences may be great enough to arouse curiosity about ancient religion, ideas of what constituted good behavior, and the society's propensity to react stoically to adversity. How would a Roman have reacted to the terrorist bombings in New York City? It bears thinking about.

Add to that the prominent continuities from Roman law, engineering, architecture, and government in our own society, and we have a springboard for meaningful discussion on almost any topic.

To take just one easy example, we are accustomed to think badly of industrialization and the concomitant proletarianization of large masses of people in our relatively recent history; yet the Romans provide us with a clear picture of a complex, highly-organized *nonindustrial* society: one where agriculture and mining were almost the only nonviolent sources of wealth and in which the engines of production depended on armies of slave laborers. This comparison, suitably phrased, can offer illuminating perspective to

students of almost any age. But again, we might also add the terrible rates of infant and child mortality in the ancient world (one in three died young), which must surely strike a chord in young readers and imbue them with an appreciation of our own society—and an understanding of the sorts of problems generally faced in developing countries.

There are many books for young readers that investigate the ancient world; without pretending to have made a scientific survey, my impression is that Greek and Near Eastern books are more apt to have a topic from mythology or literature than books about Rome, which are more likely to be informational texts. Certainly, all five of the volumes reviewed here

*Gregory S. Bucher is an assistant professor of classical and Near Eastern studies at Creighton University, in Omaha, Nebraska. The presence of a book-crazed toddler in his household, coupled with the traditional liberal arts faculty member's duty to spread the good news about one's discipline to a broader audience have led him to review several books about the Roman World (his specialty) aimed at readers of various ages. He hopes to offer useful advice to teachers looking for suitable texts about Roman civilization by suggesting books that do a good job of bringing the ancient world alive and putting flesh on the bones of the too-often dry archeological remains.*



are informational. These books are intended to be characteristic of their type, aimed at readers from late primary through late secondary and even first-year college age. My hope is to give teachers interested in pursuing a Roman topic some general criteria, elaborated in these specific examples that will help her or him to evaluate the potential usefulness of other books about Rome.

**Corbishley, Mike.** (2001). *Growing Up in Ancient Rome*. (Ill. by C. Molan). Mahwah, NJ: Troll Associates. 32 pp. ISBN: 0-8167-2722-8 (paper); \$4.95

This book is effectively a primer of Roman society. Aimed at about third-grade level and certainly within the grasp of good readers in all the primary grades, the book avoids specifics and seeks to outline general characteristics of Roman society such as family, school, shopping, commerce, games, etc. While this sort of synchronic presentation avoids many problems, it tends to provide a rather blurry and generic outline, at least to the trained eye. Perhaps not coincidentally the illustration style, which depends heavily on watercolors, is also somewhat impressionistic. As a general overview this will be irrelevant, but if a young reader subsequently reads more specialized books with a firm chronology, he or she may find that portions of the picture developed here do not apply. The book seems at most points to agree with what we know about Rome during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (ruled AD 117-138); with guidance the book might serve as an entrée to the more advanced book on Hadrian's Rome by Stephen Biesty reviewed below. The pictures (each topic is presented on a spread of pages devoted to a tableau) do a good job of extending the text by showing (sometimes hypothetical) details that would be tedious to explain, thus establishing good scope for discussion. Unpleasant issues such as slavery are handled forthrightly and without hand-wringing. Three pages at the end of the volume add interesting material about Latin and the remnants of Roman writing, as well as an index.

**Angeletti, Roberta.** (1998). *A Journey through Time ... Vulca the Etruscan*. (Trans. Beatrice Masini). New York: Oxford University Press. 32 pp. ISBN: 0-19-521506-0. \$11.98

This book, originally published in Italian, is aimed at good primary and average intermediate readers. It is the fictional story of a young boy named Robbie who plays ball amid the tombs of an Etruscan necropolis (a common sight in central to northern Italy). His ball awakes an Etruscan figure from one of the frescoes in a tomb, and together Robbie and his new friend Vulca explore two rock-cut tombs. The illustrator Angeletti, who also gets credit for the English text, has beautifully reproduced in chalk the interiors of two of the best tombs (the Tomb of the Leopards and the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing) from the best-known Etruscan necropolis, that of the ancient (and modern) city of Tarquinia, which is on the coast about a 2-hour drive north of Rome. The story is simple, and the characters in the frescoes of the tombs have been rendered in a way to make them look friendly; but Angeletti has also honestly and discreetly retained the original nudity that is characteristic of ancient art. Three pages at the end of the volume add some Etruscan terminology and explain that Etruscan civilization was a forerunner of the Roman civilization. The book makes it clear that the Etruscans had a pleasure-loving side to them and brings alive the astonishingly brilliant colors of the frescoes that can be seen by any tourist today. Teachers with a deeper knowledge of Etruscan art or culture will find that the illustrations offer numerous opportunities for further discussion.

**Hicks, Peter.** (1996). *Digging up the Past: Pompeii and Herculaneum*. New York: Thomson Learning. 48 pp. ISBN: 1-568-4739-82 (library); \$27.12

This book, aimed at readers in the intermediate grades, is an informational text laden with photographs and pictures, many rather dated. It is quite a good book in that it covers all the major aspects of the life, death, rediscovery, and now conservation of the luckless cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii that were destroyed in the 24-25 August AD 79 eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Important for the youthful audience, though perhaps also disquieting, are several photographs of the plaster casts of the bodies of dead victims, along with a good (illustrated) discussion of how the casting process was developed. The text makes clear the suffering of the victims, reinforced by illustrations of the famous cast of the dead watchdog writhing in agony,



a man gasping his life out, and a collection of bodies that clearly includes some children. In simple words, it was a real event in which real people suffered terribly, and this is not a bad thing for children to understand. But the sad fate of the victims is counterpoised by the unique precious wonders of the buried cities that are well (if briefly) presented, with good, simple descriptive prose: the watchword here is breadth, not depth, just as it ought to be. Of particular value are sections on excavation, conservation, and protection of the sites, including one infuriating picture (p. 39) disapprovingly showing tourists callously clambering among the casts of dead bodies on-site in Pompeii. This is good because it illustrates how these sites are not just frozen snapshots of the past, but living places where the past (the remains) and the present (tourists, excavators, and conservators) are in close contact. The well-informed teacher will find in the pictures much to talk about that is not mentioned in the text, making the book a launching point for further discussion. The final five pages offer a timeline; glossary; suggestions for further reading; a list of museums with artifacts from Pompeii, Herculaneum, or the Roman world; and an index.

**Biesty, Stephen, & Solway, Andrew.** (2003). *Rome in Spectacular Cross-Section*. (Ill. Stephen Biesty). New York: Scholastic. 32 pp. ISBN: 0-439-45546-4. \$18.95

This is my favorite among the books under consideration here. The setting is Rome, AD 128, under Emperor Hadrian. Biesty's illustrations are the star of the show. He illustrates in beautiful, complex double-page spreads the sights encountered by a fictional Roman boy named Titus Cotta and his fictional father, the important senator Marcus Cotta Maximus, while Titus is on holiday from his studies. The book is aimed at intermediate or early secondary-school readers and is chock-full of great information about the city of Rome and life within it, all engagingly presented. Biesty has drawn the following in cross section so as to reveal the parts and illustrate building techniques:

- Titus's house, a wealthy Roman's atrium house based on Pompeian examples;
- a Roman street, giving a flavor of urban planning, showing sewers, aqueducts, toilets, apartment buildings, and shops;
- the Temple of Jupiter, showing a grand imperial temple and the seat of the Roman religion, as well as a religious sacrifice under way;
- the Forum Romanum with cutaway drawings of several of the most important monuments in the center of civic life, including the senate house, the Cloaca Maxima, the Rostra, and the Basilica Julia;
- the Colosseum;
- the Roman port area with docks and warehouses as well as man-powered cranes;
- the Baths of Trajan, one of the central features of Roman life in the Imperial period, with detailed attention to the infrastructure;
- the races at the Circus Maximus; and
- a second look at Titus' house showing nighttime activities.

Throughout, both author and illustrator have sought to maintain a high level of accuracy. The excellent, well-printed illustrations are very busy—so much so that they often require a few moments for even an experienced eye to parse them—and full of odd details and good humor. No illustration is without copious explanatory material, and the various scenes also offer opportunities for extended (if schematic) discussions or illustrations of further topics, such as types of imported goods in the port scene, the structure of Roman society in the Forum scene, and the structure of the Roman household in the first scene at Titus's house. The glossary helps readers grasp unfamiliar words while the index facilitates cross-linking ideas and locating favorite topics. I highly recommend the book, which in my opinion will stand up to the needs even of students in the eighth or ninth grades, especially those lucky enough to take Latin. It would be a particularly useful source for a student paper on daily life in Rome.



**Connolly, Peter, & Dodge, Hazel.** (1998). *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens and Rome*. New York: Oxford University Press. 256 pp. ISBN: 0-19-521582-6. \$21.95

This book, aimed at advanced secondary school and first-year college students, is intended to be a comprehensive introduction to Greek and Roman civilization through a close examination of life within the best-known cities of each, Athens and Rome. Connolly copiously illustrates the book, often with pictures drawn from wellknown photographs. Dodge, a major scholar, provides a competent text in a register accessible to its intended audience. They have spared no effort to present material in a new and visually arresting way. I was delighted at the illustrations offering bird's-eye views of Athens (and surrounding Attica) and Rome (and surrounding Latium), as well as numerous illustrations of individual monuments on a smaller scale. The authors have cut a few corners in their presentation of the historical framework for Greek and Roman culture, but for more advanced groups that provides an opportunity for extended

discussion. Seemingly no topic is too mundane for an interesting treatment, from Greek women's hairstyles as deduced from Attic vases to the four Pompeian styles of Roman wall art. Comparative evidence for the Roman side from Pompeii and Ostia (Rome's port city, which, like Pompeii, was preserved by natural processes) is fully exploited. With few exceptions, Athens is described as she was at the point of her greatest flourishing, the fifth century BC; Rome more diachronically but with great emphasis on the imperial period, which we know best (we have seen this in other texts above, too). While this book is not as charming as Biesty's, it is a very informative sketch of classical civilization as exemplified in its chief urban settings and should be considered indispensable for any teacher who teaches about Greece and Rome. It has the usual end matter with a glossary, suggestions for further adult reading, and an index.

These five books are the best I have seen on Rome and ought to serve the needs of almost any instructor who wants to teach about Rome or to have students read about it independently.



