

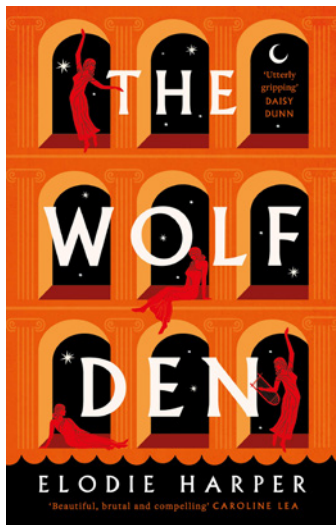
Book Review

The Wolf Den

Harper (E.) Pp. 454. London: Head of Zeus, 2021.
Cased, £7.99. ISBN: 9781838933531.

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This novel is the fictional story of Amara, sold into slavery in a brothel in 1st century Pompeii. *The Wolf Den* is the first of a trilogy which follows the progress of Amara. (Further titles are *The House with the Golden Door* and *The Temple of Fortuna*.) During the course of *The Wolf Den*, Amara finds herself in a horrible situation, yet her determination to win a way out and to help out as many of her fellow sex workers as possible makes this book readable and hopeful. A theme is female empowerment – Amara must develop her business acumen and strategise in order to improve her lot.

The characters are nuanced – Amara who seems to have a strong moral compass finds herself becoming a loan-shark in order to get out of her predicament. It turns out that the brothel owner, who at first seems entirely loathsome, was raised in a setting of prostitution himself, which invites our sympathy.

Harper's choice of subject is central to life in Pompeii. Sex work was certainly very widespread – it is estimated there were 35 brothels in Pompeii at that time – roughly one to every 75 male inhabitants (M. Beard, *Pompeii*, 2008, 233–9). This is hard to credit, but there are two factors which may help to explain it – one is that there was a blurred line between brothels and inns. The other is that there were many incoming males since Pompeii was a trading port at the junction of sea and river.

Harper's writing is not gratuitous and she holds back on details about the sex and violence, but inevitably, in a book about a sex worker, the threat of sexual violence is ever-present. I would certainly recommend this book to other teachers – Harper is very strong on the atmosphere of Pompeii – the sights and smells. (Although I did find one anachronism concerning smoke – see if you can spot it.) It is also a plausible consideration of how a woman might climb through the profession of sex work to gain a position of some wealth and power. In addition, it offers a chance for us to consider, at one remove, how many modern enslaved people are still ill-treated.

However, due to the subject matter of sex work and the setting in a brothel, I would definitely not recommend it to a pupil below sixth form age and even at that age, I would be extremely cautious.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000375