

Under Vesuvius: A Reflective Travelogue in Verse and Prose

Richard Haffey

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Under Vesuvius is a creative text that combines travel memories with fun poems and personal reflections.

Part travelogue, part personal narrative, and part poetry collection, Richard Haffey's *Under Vesuvius* follows travels through Italy's historical Bay of Naples.

Haffey signed up for a tour through the Bay of Naples when he was in desperate need of a vacation; he had just left his teaching job because of an official prohibition. At first, the work draws parallels between the US and ancient Rome, drawing on the sights to do so, as of the lead pipes in the ruins that represented the first indoor plumbing. But then the text expands to cover the greater grandeur of Italy: its cuisine and museums; Pompeii and other attractions. These are drawn on as a source of perspective.

Fascinating as it mixes verses into its observations and personal narrative, the book brings Italy into colorful focus. Haffey describes piazzas, ruins, gardens, and churches in intricate detail. "Anacapari" concentrates on a garden, where "Bougainvillea bracts cascade in reds, pinks, and purples" and statues are "sculpted stone and patina forms." Such turns of phrase result in dramatic mental images.

Mentions of history also play in—and not just Italy's history; Haffey's memories and past travel experiences are a continual factor. "Buffalo Mozzarella, In a Word," marvels that a breed of buffalo exists in Italy, and that its milk is used to create mozzarella, a delicacy that Haffey previously assumed was American. And parallels to the past are drawn, as with a comparison of climbing a cliffside village on the Amalfi coast to experiences going up the Chichen Itza pyramid in Mexico. Where the book wades into history, its evocations are grand: of Pliny the Younger, World War II, or figures entombed in volcanic ash in Pompeii.

Many of the book's verses have the qualities of prose, plus line breaks. Their natural rhythm is propulsive. On occasion, the lines become playful and experimental. "Here and There" muses:

*It's a matter of degree, or perhaps degrees,
if I grant myself some latitude.*

The same poem, in addressing stairs, uses line breaks to structure the text so that it appears in the form of steps.

Still, the book comes to feel as though its trying to do too much at once. Its elements of poetry, travelogue, and memoir, while engaging on their own, are combined to such an extent that their threads are lost. The addition of "Windows on the World," a short story, heightens this sense of disorganization.

Under Vesuvius is a creative text that combines travel memories with fun poems; these pieces aim to capture Italy's grandeur from a personal perspective.

KATERIE PRIOR (November 30, 2021)

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