

Pompeii – The Life of a Roman Town by Mary Beard.  
Profile Books 2008

Mary Beard is a Classics professor at Cambridge University, author or co-author of two other Profile books, on the Parthenon and the Coliseum, and a great communicator of her passion for and knowledge of the ancient world.

In Pompeii she gives the reader the most up to date, well-researched and beautifully illustrated history of the most fabled Roman city of them all. The book is divided into 9 chapters, each considering a specific aspect of the life of the city, such as House and Home, Earning a Living, and The Pleasures of the Body (the latter the chapter that – with Pompeii's reputation – some readers may turn to first!). But Professor Beard also writes about the earlier history of Pompeii before the eruption of Vesuvius, the governance of the city and its multi-faceted and multi-faith religious life.

Beard's writing is detailed, but leavened with humour throughout, and although a scholar of Roman history would find this a satisfying read a lay person fascinated by the ancient world should not be put off by its academic pedigree.

As with her previous books on the Parthenon and the Coliseum, there is a valuable section at the end on making a visit to Pompeii as well as suggestions for further reading.

Pompeii is the best sort of history – informative, approachable, illuminating and rewarding in the extreme.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh