Book Review

The Wolf Den


Clare Harvey
Beaumont School, St Albans, UK
cfharveylatin@gmail.com

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