

Book Review

Rome as a Guide to the Good Life. A Philosophical Grand Tour

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Scott Samuelson's *Rome as a Guide to the Good Life* is a thoughtful, engaging, and quietly ambitious work that defies easy categorisation. Part philosophical meditation, part cultural history, and part travel companion, the book offers a compelling argument: that the city of Rome, its ancient ruins, Renaissance masterpieces, medieval basilicas, bustling streets, and modern pleasures can serve as a living classroom for reflecting on what it means to live well. It is not quite a guidebook, not quite a textbook, and not quite a memoir. Instead, Samuelson constructs an accessible 'grand tour' in which landscapes, stories, and art become prompts for ethical inquiry. For teachers and students of classics, philosophy, art history, or religious studies, this interdisciplinary weaving is a major strength. The book models what it looks like to read a city as a text and to let material culture, literature, and experience illuminate one another.

The book's central premise is simple: Rome is a site of layered human striving – intellectual, artistic, political, and spiritual – and each layer offers a different vantage point on the perennial question of how to live. As Samuelson moves through the city, he brings ancient philosophers (Cicero, Seneca, Lucretius, Horace, Marcus Aurelius), early Christian thinkers (Augustine), and later artists and writers (Caravaggio, Bernini, Raphael, Bruno) into dialogue. This is true to the book: Its cast spans many centuries and exemplifies Samuelson's belief that Rome's power lies in its palimpsest of voices rather than any single era. This approach stands out for avoiding the trap of presenting ancient philosophy as a self-help manual in Roman clothing. Samuelson is clear that Stoic aphorisms or Ciceronian rhetoric cannot simply be lifted wholesale into modern life. Instead, he attends to context, the civic environments in which ideas arose, the artistic forms that gave them expression, and the moral ambiguities embedded in Rome's grandeur. The result is a book that encourages reflection rather than prescribes rules.

One of the book's great pleasures lies in the way it treats Rome's visual culture. Although Samuelson is not an art historian, his

readings of iconic works are lively and accessible, and they reinforce his central claim: that art can be a philosophical companion. His discussion of Raphael's *School of Athens* becomes a meditation on intellectual plurality, how differing schools of thought can coexist in a single civic space, how dialogue can be staged, and how the arrangement of bodies communicates ideals of rational harmony. Likewise, his treatment of Bernini's sculptures goes beyond stylistic description. Bernini's dynamic energies, the twist of a torso and the tilt of a head, become opportunities to consider moral agency, emotional intensity, and the drama of human decision-making. Caravaggio receives special attention, and rightly so: The painter's chiaroscuro becomes a visual analogue for the complexity of ethical life. Caravaggio's sudden illuminations mirror the moments of insight or revelation that ethical reflection often requires; his deep shadows evoke the obscurity, conflict, and imperfection that characterise moral experience. Samuelson does not overstate the case; he never suggests that these artworks *were meant* as philosophical treatises. Rather, he shows how attentive looking can become a form of ethical practice. Crucially, these interpretations align with the actual content of the book: Samuelson moves fluidly between visual observation and ethical rumination, using Rome's art to animate philosophical ideas rather than merely illustrate them.

Samuelson's treatment of literary sources is similarly evocative. Horace, in particular, emerges as a recurring guide. The book highlights Horace's ambivalent relationship with the city, the tension between urban bustle and the desire for moderation, and places him back within the sensory environment of Rome. Samuelson attends to the lived spaces of Horace's poetry: alleyways, markets, and the view from a rooftop. These settings become part of a reflective practice on contentment and balance. This is firmly grounded in the book's content: Horace is indeed one of the most sustained literary presences. Cicero appears not through exhaustive textual analysis but as a symbol of civic virtue and rhetorical responsibility. Standing within the Forum, Samuelson asks what it means to inherit a civic tradition marked by both idealism and violence, a question the city's ruins press upon any thoughtful visitor. The book does not present Cicero as an uncomplicated hero; rather, his ghostly presence serves as a reminder of the fragility of civic order and the moral weight of public speech. Across these chapters, Samuelson's method is consistent: Literature becomes a lens – a voice in conversation with place – rather than an isolated object of study.

One of the book's most pedagogically useful features is its ability to make Rome feel simultaneously distant and immediate. Samuelson's prose balances scholarly insight with personal observation. He writes about the morning light entering the Pantheon, the atmosphere of a Caravaggio chapel, or the textures of a neighbourhood street, not to romanticise the city but to show how paying attention to the physical world sharpens philosophical sensibility. The book also emphasises the contrasts at the heart of Rome: beauty and brutality, grandeur and decay, pagan and Christian, and ancient and modern. Samuelson neither sanitises nor condemns these tensions; instead, he treats them as integral to

understanding how humans grapple with meaning. This balanced approach reflects the book accurately: It is neither a celebration nor a lament but a thoughtful exploration of complexity. For classroom use, this makes the text highly adaptable. Instructors could pair Samuelson's reflections with close readings of Seneca, viewings of Bernini sculptures, or discussions of modern Stoicism. While the chapters do not include built-in teaching prompts, each one naturally generates questions for seminar discussion, reflective writing, or cross-disciplinary analysis.

Perhaps the book's greatest pedagogical virtue is its refusal to silo knowledge. Samuelson draws connections between philosophy, art history, literature, architecture, theology, and modern urban life. For teachers running cross-listed modules – classics with philosophy, art history with religious studies, or literature with visual culture – the book models the very kind of intellectual synthesis many of us wish our students to practice. Its accessibility is another strength. The prose is clear without being simplistic, and Samuelson's autobiographical interludes, though restrained, offer students an example of reflective humanistic writing. For undergraduates who have never visited Rome, the book serves as a vicarious introduction to the city; for those preparing to travel, it provides philosophical depth without overwhelming detail.

If the book has limitations, they are modest. Its focus tends towards the canonical, that is, major philosophers, major artists, and major sites. This reflects Samuelson's project rather than a

shortcoming, but instructors hoping to introduce students to lesser-known material (provincial inscriptions, minor painters, or the archaeology of everyday life) may need supplementary readings. Similarly, the book's eclectic structure, its movement across eras, media, and themes, means that it does not attempt to offer a systematic account of Roman philosophy or Roman history. Its strength is its reflective, wandering quality; its weakness is that it occasionally leaves topics before fully developing them. Yet, this is part of the charm. The book is designed not to conclude arguments but to open them.

Rome as a Guide to the Good Life is a generous, humane, and intellectually enlivening book. It invites readers, students, teachers, and curious travellers alike to treat Rome not as a museum but as a conversation partner. Samuelson shows how art, literature, and physical space can guide ethical reflection, and how the city's many layers of history embody the perennial human struggle to make sense of life. For classicists, historians, philosophers, and educators, this book offers both inspiration and practical use. It models the kind of interdisciplinary, reflective study that helps students connect ideas across time and space. Above all, it reminds us that thinking about the good life is inseparable from attending to the world around us, and that Rome, in all its splendour and complexity, remains one of the richest places on earth to pursue that question.

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