



by Eugen Ruge

dtv

April 2023 / 368pp

Fiction

🏆 Spiegel bestselling author: ranked 9th for *Pompeji*, 6th for *Cabo de Gata*, 6th for *Metropol*, 1st for *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts*

Pompeii. Or: The Five Speeches of Jowna

Pompeji oder Die fünf Reden des Jowna

review

The latest novel by German Book Prize winner Eugen Ruge, *Pompeji* is an ambitious work of historical fiction that reflects contemporary issues. Holding great appeal for politically engaged readers as well as those interested in classical history, *Pompeji* is an engaging tale that employs vivid characterisation, a pacey narrative and clever humour to draw us into a fictionalised world.

Narrated from the perspective of Josse, a working-class citizen of Pompeii, the novel begins just after the earthquake of AD 62 that largely destroyed the city. One of its knock-on effects is to interrupt Josse's schooling; he instead spends several years hanging around the ruins and reinventing himself as a member of the Pannonian aristocracy. Josse and his friends unwittingly end up at a meeting of philosophical groups banned by Emperor Titus, where one of the members announces that the nearby Monte Somma is a volcano. Convinced of the danger, Josse makes a halting speech – the first of five around which the novel is structured – recommending that everyone leave Pompeii.

Though Josse's first speech is hesitant, his talent for rhetoric improves when he joins a community of philosophers and free thinkers founding a new town further down the coast. The place is

known as The Window on the Sea and attracts a number of outsiders. During this period, Josse also makes the acquaintance of Polybius, a Pompeian businessman who encourages him to overthrow the new community's leader – which provides the occasion for another speech. Shortly afterwards, Josse falls under the seductive spell of Livia, the wife of Pompeii's governor, who is keen to avoid a mass exodus to the new town for personal financial reasons.

Consulting Pliny and Pythagoras – whose back stories are presented in digressions from the main narrative – Josse discovers that Monte Somma is not in fact a volcano, and accordingly urges the citizens of Pompeii to stay. He then stands for election as city governor, and is delivering his fifth and final speech of the novel when Vesuvius erupts and destroys everything in sight.

Rhetoric is a major theme of *Pompeii*, with Josse's speeches increasing in skill and scope as the novel progresses. Ruge reflects present-day concerns around rhetoric and fake news; Josse's personal reinvention, political machinations and willingness to bend the truth also speak to the power-grabbing often seen in the real world. Other themes include democracy, military might, class systems and colonialism – as much as Pompeii is a multicultural city, it is also portrayed as a colony of Rome. The historical context is bolstered by the inclusion of real classical figures, while Ruge's idiomatic language and richly textured narrative give *Pompeii* broad appeal.

press quotes

Eugen Ruge may be one of my favourite contemporary Germany authors – always funny, he knows how to come up with a good story, and gives us a lot to laugh about.

ZDF, Das Literarische Quartett, Eva Menasse

Eugen Ruge has a great sense of humour, which he enjoys pairing with cool observation. Fascinating (...).

Die Zeit, Adam Soboczynski

Amazingly current (...). Having read it, you want to dive deeper into this ancient world and find out all you can about this city that simply disappeared under a cloud of hot ash and a river of lava.

Süddeutsche Zeitung, Christian Mayer

He gives a virtuoso performance as an ironic, all-knowing historian. (...) As you might expect, Ruge's Pompeii holds up a mirror to today's society.

Der Spiegel, Wolfgang Höbel

Utterly contemporary. The ancient world has seldom been brought to life with such immediacy. And it has never been so diabolically funny. (...) Eugen Ruge is far from the first to transform the destruction of Pompeii into a novel. (...) And yet he generates a tension that he sustains to the very end.

Sächsische Zeitung, Karin Grossmann

about the author



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Eugen Ruge was born in 1954 in Soswa, in Western Siberia, and came to East Berlin with his parents in 1956. After studying Maths, he worked at the Central Institute for Geophysics at the GDR Academy of Sciences from 1980 to 1985. He then began to write, at first mainly theatre and radio plays. In early 1989, he fled to the Federal Republic. In 2011 he published the novel *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts* (In Times of Decreasing Light), which won the Döblin Prize, the German Book Prize, and the Aspekte Literature Prize. He later published *Cabo de Gata*, *Follower* and, in 2019, the

novel Metropol. He divides his time between Berlin and the island of Rügen.

Previous works: In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts, Rowohlt (2011); Cabo de Gata, Rowohlt (2013), Annäherung: Notizen aus 14 Ländern, Rowohlt (2015); Follower: Vierzehn Sätze über einen fiktiven Enkel, Rowohlt (2016); Metropol, Rowohlt (2019).

Previous translations: In times of fading light, Faber & Faber (UK) / Graywolf Press (US) (2013); Cabo de Gata, Graywolf Press (2016).

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