

Book Presentation

Maria Pace Ottieri, Il Vesuvio universale, Einaudi, pp. 212.

Ever since the 79 A.D eruption destroyed Ercolano and Pompei, Vesuvius has never ceased to fascinate writers, poets, artists, scientists and historians. Its green, graceful slopes, the sea and the islands it looks on to, the ruins, the 18th century villas, the vineyards and oranges conjure up images of extreme beauty that are known the world over. But Vesuvius is not just a universal icon: in the intervals between eruptions, often over a few centuries, the mountain reveals its more benevolent and generous side, allowing man to tame its coat, until its next bout of impetuous rage. For millennia men have succumbed to its irresistible appeal and inhabited Vesuvius, their time held in check by its own lingering, fiery thirty-nine thousand year history.

Its postcard image has changed radically since the Second World War and at great speed: the villages around the volcano have proliferated, forming a tight-knit conurbation, as urban planners might say, a narrow strip of land that seven hundred thousand people now call home. Having enjoyed a millennial promiscuity, reassured by the ultimate saint and resting their faith in many madonnas, thankful for the gifts of a fertile soil, leavened by the volcano's sap, the 'Vesuvians' don't just inhabit the volcano, they crowd around its slopes and reside there overwhelmed by what Horatius in an 'Epistle' termed a 'strenuous indifference'.

The cod dryers at Somma Vesuviana, a tradition that has been passed on through the generations, the Pomigliano factory workers, the old men who could sing and those of today who think singing might hinder efficiency. Then there are the Vesuvian world champion boxers and the bankruptcy of an entire maritime city, the birth of New Pompei, two thousand years after the one that was wiped out by the eruption of 79 A.D. and the precious farmers of the Vesuvius, damaged by the criminal events in the Terra dei Fuochi. The slopes of the Vesuvius are always teeming with life and thousands of years of history, basking in a uniqueness that even Italy can't match.

Yet the Vesuvian city is one of the places in Italy where life is toughest, where the perceived risk linked to Vesuvius' mood is set aside by the daily burden of unemployment, lack of health care, schools, mobility, infected by rampant criminality, by the desolation that overshadows our modern times even in its most extreme and hostile manifestations.

The population density and the proximity to Naples and the caldera in Campi Flegrei are what make Vesuvius one of the most dangerous volcanos in the world. An eruption today would affect the lives of close to three million people. Today Vesuvius is dormant. After its last outburst on 18 March 1944, it entered a period of abeyance, of apparent quiescence, deceiving the inhabitants of the Vesuvian villages that it has fallen asleep forever, but it's an active volcano and it could easily come back to life again.

In a constant toing and froing from past to present, Maria Pace Ottieri investigates Vesuvius like a living being; she listens to the stories and the voices of this land perched atop rivers of lava, painting an intense, poetic portrait of a world where lives have always been spent as if they were held hostage

by a looming catastrophe.

Maria Pace Ottieri is a writer and journalist. Her first book, *Amore Nero* was published by Mondadori (1984, Viareggio Prize for first book) then came *Stranieri, un atlante di voci* (Rizzoli), *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* which inspired director Marco Tullio Giordana's film by the same title (Nottetempo 2004), *Raggiungere l'ultimo uomo* (Einaudi 2009), *Abbandonami* (Nottetempo, Grinzane Cavour Prize 2005), *Ricchi tra i poveri* (Longanesi 2006), *Promettimi di non morire* (Nottetempo, 2013).

Friday 7th September 13.50 to 14.20 Room Corsica, Conference Venue