

Ron Smith

an excerpt of

*Rome Obsession**

Obsession wormed its way into my soul on a weekend trip in 1990. I had trained down from Merano, in the Italian Alps, to take a quick look at Rome; I walked the city, had four meals, and chugged back to my studies near the Austrian border. Over the next few months I found Rome returning to me, piecemeal, with increasing, even alarming, power. Over coffee or while jogging or as I drifted off to sleep, there I was in front of the intimidating Palace of Justice or the dreadful Tomb of Augustus or the sunken temples of Largo Argentina or the forbidding black statue of Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake on the very spot. At dinner in Richmond, Atlanta, New York—even in Tel Aviv, Dublin, Pylos, Vathy—I found myself suddenly in the swarming Roman streets, in its car-jammed piazzas, strolling the Tiber, circled round by Bernini's vast colonnade. I've journeyed to Rome twenty times now, seizing every opportunity to go back. I have stayed in nearly every sector of the city, from Parioli to the Aventine.

*An essay-review of

THE SEVEN HILLS OF ROME: A GEOLOGICAL TOUR OF THE ETERNAL CITY. By Grant Heiken, Renato Funicello, and Donatella De Rita. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 245 pp. \$18.95, paper.

THE HISTORY OF ROME, BOOKS 1–5. By Livy. Translated, with introduction and notes, by Valerie M. Warrior. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2006. 452 pp. \$39.95. \$13.95, paper.

ROME AND ENVIRONS: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL GUIDE. By Filippo Coarelli. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 555 pp. \$24.95, paper.

THE ROMAN TRIUMPH. By Mary Beard. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 434 pp. \$29.95.

ANCIENT ROME ON FIVE DENARII A DAY. By Philip Matyszak. London: Thames and Hudson, 2007. 144 pp. \$22.95.

BASILICA: THE SPLENDOR AND THE SCANDAL: BUILDING ST. PETER'S. By R. A. Scotti. New York: Plume, 2007. 315 pp. \$15.00, paper.

SATYR SQUARE: A YEAR, A LIFE IN ROME. By Leonard Barkan. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 289 pp. \$24.00.

FOUR SEASONS IN ROME: ON TWINS, INSOMNIA, AND THE BIGGEST FUNERAL IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. By Anthony Doerr. New York: Scribner, 2007. 210 pp. \$24.00.

BLUE GUIDE: ROME. 9th ed. By Alta Macadam. New York: Norton, 2006. 623 pp. \$28.95, paper.

NOT BUILT IN A DAY: EXPLORING THE ARCHITECTURE OF ROME. By George H. Sullivan. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006. 391 pp. \$19.95, paper.

As Aldous Huxley observed, Rome inspires the visitor with a passion to know it completely, to experience and master all its details; the city thus inspires the impossible. Even locals who have enjoyed long lives within the eleven-mile circuit of the sometimes ghostly Aurelian Walls cannot fully take in a single city block. And there's a great deal just outside those four square miles of the *centro storico*, much that is equally complex and mystifying. . . .



Archaeologists recognize that Rome is unique in its urban survivals and continuities and in its ongoing structural accretions. Buildings from the second century BC to the fifth century AD continue to stand, and some still function today. Half a century ago Eleanor Clark complained about Rome's "too-muchness"; certainly what the city continues to demand is something well beyond stereoscopic vision. The ideal visitor is required to possess not only fully functioning human sensory equipment, but also the cognitive equivalent of the humble housefly's four thousand ocular facets. Layered, honeycombed, haunted, and wormholed by millennia of interpenetrating arcs and angles of history, legend, masonry, traffic, dogma, fashion, crime, art, politics, and propaganda, the city one hopes to see is always there and not-there, intensely present and eerily, sometimes infuriatingly, absent. So much has been vaporized by time, so much thrust underground by the centuries, yet so much remains present, palpable, reassembled, jumbled, and fused together.