

THE STORY OF POMPEII

Article by JONATHAN SHAW



The story of Pompeii is one of those true stories from history that is both terribly sad and strangely wonderful. I identified with it when I visited this serene, tranquil place ... but that's the kind of stringer I am.
-Phyllis Wong

THIS STORY BEGINS WITH A BURPING GIANT AND ENDS WITH THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE KILLED IN A FEW MINUTES—BUT REMEMBERED FOREVER.

BEAUTIFUL ONE DAY, DEATHLY THE NEXT

The opening scene is a city in southern Italy, on the 24th of August in the year 79 AD—1930 years ago.

A lovely city: everywhere you look, your eyes fall on beautiful things—buildings, statues, fountains, mosaics and brightly coloured paintings, paintings, paintings.

A busy city. Chariot wheels creak and rumble along the deeply rutted streets, while pedestrians avoid the mud by crossing at special stepping stones. The baker Modestus has 81 loaves of bread in his ovens. A beggar sits at one of the city gates wearing a new, sturdy pair of sandals. The gladiators at the amphitheatre practise their fighting skills, preparing for their next big 'performance' when each of them must kill or be killed. Others are meeting with a richly-jewelled woman. The priests of the Temple of Isis are sitting down to a meal of fish and eggs. Slaves go about their work, whether it is helping to repair the damage caused by an earthquake 17 years ago, or tending the beautiful gardens of the rich.

Many people have left town in the last few days, frightened by some small earth tremors and other worrying signs, but apart from that, it's an ordinary, busy summer day in the city of Pompeii.

Am I making up all that about the fish and eggs, the sandals, the woman's jewels, and the number of loaves of bread? No! I actually know for certain about these things. How? Because of the giant, that's how.

THE CATASTROPHE RIPS

The giant was as big as a mountain. In fact, it *was* a mountain, a volcano named Vesuvius.

Now, you know that a volcano is a mountain with a pool of liquid rock, or lava, inside it. On the day we're talking about, a bubble of steam was making trouble in Vesuvius's pool of lava. In some volcanoes a bubble wouldn't matter so much. Gas just escapes from the lava in little plops without any fuss (volcanoes are like that in Hawaii). But in others, the lava is much thicker and heavier, and the bubbles have to build up enormous

pressure before they can pop—it's like the difference between polite little burps and huge ones that rattle the windows.

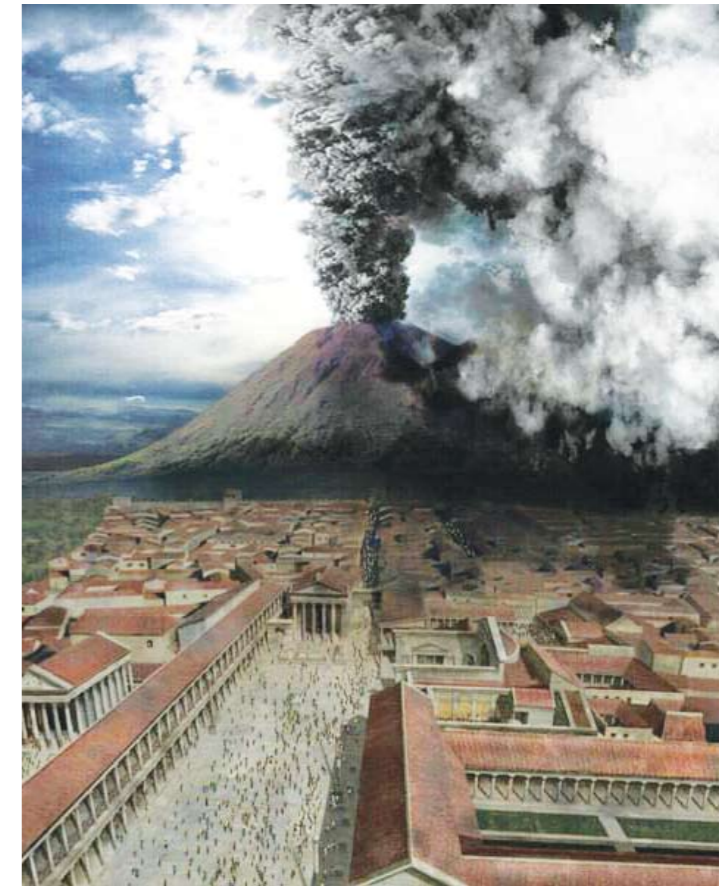
Though no-one at that time even knew Vesuvius was a volcano, it was certainly not polite—its bubble had to push with stupendous pressure before it could escape. So when it did burst, it blew the top off the mountain.

The busy hum of Pompeii was suddenly interrupted by an ear-shattering explosion. Vesuvius's pool of lava was ripped apart, and hurled kilometres into the air.

People came running from their houses to see what all the noise was about. Those who lived at a safe distance saw a cloud shaped like a pine tree reaching high into the sky. This 'cloud' was actually millions of tonnes of ash and small, very hot stones held up in the air by the force of the explosion. Some of the cloud was blown away by the wind, and 20 kilometres away people had to take shelter. Many left their homes, fearing it was the end of the world. Not all of them survived.

But Pompeii was not at a safe distance. There, things happened with terrifying speed after the first mighty explosion. The great, doom-laden tree-cloud stood there for a short time, then collapsed on itself like a fountain that is suddenly switched off. The whole enormous mass fell and rolled down the slopes of the mountain—a gigantic avalanche of fire, a dark galloping mist, a glowing swarm of tiny stones and ash that no living thing could resist, or outrun.

This cloud broke over Pompeii like a giant wave crashing on a beach, killing and burying everything in its path metres deep: people, animals, plants, streets, houses. All the roofs of Pompeii caved in. Some



A digital impression of the eruption (not to scale)

people escaped in time, but not those who hesitated to save some precious object, such as a statue or a bag of gold, or those who thought they would be safe hidden in their cellar (18 skeletons were found later in one cellar), or those too slow on their feet, like the beggar at the gate. All of these people fell beneath the hail of rocks, suffocated in the ash or were poisoned by the foul-smelling gases. At least 2000 people died within the city, and many more fell on the road to escape.



AN EXTRAORDINARY THING

Some died sitting against a sheltering wall. Others lay down on the ground with their arms over their faces trying to ward off the dreadful heat. The beggar with good sandals clutched his bag of offerings. A woman lay in the road, her baby pressed to her chest and two little girls holding tight to her skirts. The priests left their meal and gathered up some precious objects from the Temple before falling one by one beneath the deadly rain. Inside one house, a man and his little daughter climbed to the top room and covered themselves with pillows and cushions.

They all died, and their bodies decayed like ordinary bodies, but the ash and stones and mud that settled around them kept their shapes as it cooled and hardened. And that is part of what makes Pompeii so famous. Hundreds of years later, when the ruins were being dug up, the workers would make plaster-of-Paris moulds from the empty spaces left in the rock. So a visitor today can see exactly how one person held his arms out, where another lay her head, how a dog died



A cast of a Pompeian victim, with Vesuvius in the background.

while still struggling to break free of its leash. Photographs tell part of the story, but if you enter the museum at Pompeii and see those shapes trapped forever in the moment when they died, you'll never forget them.

After it had covered the people, the waves of ash kept coming. The sky rained ash, and went on raining until Pompeii was completely buried—buried and preserved. No air could eat the colour from the paintings as it has from most others of those days. No feet scuffed the mosaics on the floors. No invaders carried off the delicate jewels or dishes. The surgeon's instruments never wore out. Even the streets were never repaired or rebuilt in new styles. The priests' eggs and fish turned to carbon, but were never eaten. Modestus's 81 loaves of bread were overcooked—and spent more than 1800 years in the ovens.

And not just Pompeii—at least six towns were buried. Herculaneum, on another slope of the mountain, met a slightly different fate. It drowned in a tide of thick, hot mud, which hardened so quickly that even wooden doors were saved from rotting away.

As soon as the ashes cooled, people dug down to salvage their valuables or steal other people's. But those who escaped started new lives in other places, and the old cities were soon forgotten. There was only an expanse of grey rock, where once there had been fields, vineyards, houses, public places.

Hundreds of years passed. New towns grew up in the same place and all that was left was a local legend of *La Città* (Italian for "The City") said to lie buried deep beneath the surface.

BACK INTO THE LIGHT

The story of how these lost cities were found again is a long and interesting one.

First there was a series of accidents. One land-owner had a channel built in 1594, and the workmen found ruins underground. No-one was very interested. Peasants digging their wells occasionally found beautiful objects carved in marble. Again not much interest until, in the 1700s, some rich people began to pay attention to such findings.

Second, there was an organised search for treasures. At first this was so the rich people could decorate their new houses with beautiful ancient objects. Later, the treasures would be taken away to museums all over Europe. The Archaeological Museum in Naples has rooms filled with things taken from Pompeii and other towns: the walls are lined with portraits of people, scenes from stories of the gods, paintings of food and animals. Row upon row of cabinets show off the craftsmanship of those times. My favourites are the container of dried fruit (very dried) and the hollow bronze head of a goddess with a hole in the back that the priests would speak into and make it sound as if the statue itself spoke in a hollow voice (I've been there and done it!).

The third stage, which started more than a hundred years ago, and is still going on today, is the careful scraping away of rock and dirt to bring this Sleeping Beauty of a city back—not to life, but at least to the light of day.

So if you go to Italy one day, you can visit the restored city of Pompeii. You can cross the streets at the big stepping stones, and admire the bright colours on the walls of the houses. You can be



A Pompeii street today

delighted by the little statue of a dancing faun. No charioteers will shout warnings; no-one will sell wine or bread in the shops that line the streets. But the same sorts of plants now bloom in the gardens as did in days of old, and birds sing again in the branches of Pompeian trees.

There is a modern city just next door to the ruins of old Pompeii, and grapevines once again grow on the lower slopes of the mountain. But the giant Vesuvius has erupted 70 times since Pompeii was buried. The last time, which was in 1944, half a metre of ash fell once again on the ancient streets. The volcano is still alive, still smoking. And who knows what the future may bring? ■

Session 2

Touchdown

The Story of Pompeii Article by Jonathan Shaw

Session Focus

RS3.7 Critically analyses techniques used by writers to create certain effects, to use language creatively, to position the reader in various ways and to construct different interpretations of experience.

- *Identifies techniques writers can use to dramatise texts about historical events (historical recounts).*

RS3.8 Identifies the text structure of a wider range of more complex text types and discusses how the characteristic grammatical features work to influence readers' and viewers' understanding of texts.

- *Identifies common structures and features of an historical recount.*

What you will need

- multiple copies of **Worksheet 2**
- optional: enlarged copy of the article for guided reading
- for additional information on different types of narrative refer to *Teaching about Texts*, NSW Board of Studies, 2007

Setting the Scene

- Create a two-column table with the headings *Historical Recount* and *Narrative Techniques*.
- Introduce the session by reviewing the text type of historical recount.
- Ask students: What needs to be included in an historical recount of an event, for example a recount of the Australian gold rush? In listing, emphasise the importance of facts:
 - accurate facts about the location, dates, social and physical setting
 - factual biographies of leading participants and the social groups (e.g. miners, squatters)
 - factual information about the major events and their consequences.
- Point out that historical recounts depend on accurate facts, but facts can often be 'dry': lists of dates, names, places, events.
- Ask: How can writers of historical recounts keep their texts interesting as well as accurate? One answer is for them to borrow some of the techniques fiction writers use. Explain to students that narrative writing techniques can be used by a writer to add drama and 'colour' to historical facts in a recount.
- Then ask: What techniques do writers of narratives use to make their stories dramatic and exciting? Prompt students to consider characters, setting and complication. Techniques to suggest:
 - create interesting characters who are distinctive individuals.
 - describe vividly the setting the story takes place in so we can visualise it.
 - describe details of characters lives (thoughts, feelings, actions) so they seem real to readers.
 - use dialogue between characters to develop the plot.
 - put a character in a suspenseful situation, i.e. create a complication, so the character has a problem to solve.
- Explain we'll now look at how some of these techniques are used in an historical recount about Pompeii.

Modelled Reading

- Ask students to turn to the *Touchdown* article *The Story of Pompeii*. What do they notice about the title? (Use of the word *story* is already a hint that the article will be a dramatisation of the historical events.)
- Ask students to read Phyllis Wong's comments. Notice how Phyllis emphasises that the story is *true* (i.e. factual) but also that it's *sad* and *wonderful* (descriptive adjectives we'd normally not expect to find in an historical article.)
- Now read aloud the standfirst (the paragraph that begins *This story begins ...*). Point out to the students the narrative techniques that are used, e.g juxtaposition of odd things, to reinforce the suggestion of drama. These can be recorded in the two column table.
- Read aloud to students down to the second subheading. Identify for the students some of the narrative techniques used, e.g. use of the word *scene* to imply drama; use of the present tense; direct appeal to reader to 'imagine'; image-building through detail, conversational style ...
- Now select a student to read from the subheading *The catastrophe rips*. Alert students to the change in verb tense, from present to past. Point out that this shift is common in narrative: orientation in the present tense (habitual, usual scene); complication in past tense (since it's a one-off dramatic event). Add this tense shift to the list of narrative techniques.
- Ask students to identify the similes and figurative expressions used in this section: e.g. *a cloud shaped like a pine tree; like a fountain that is suddenly switched off; like a giant wave crashing on a beach, a gigantic avalanche of fire, a dark galloping mist, a glowing swarm ...*
- Add 'use of similes to build images' to the list of narrative techniques.
- Ask students to identify the sensory adjectives and action verbs used to dramatise this section, e.g. *stupendous, ear-shattering, mighty, doom-laden, gigantic; burst, ripped apart, hurled ...* Add sensory adjectives and action verbs to the narrative techniques list.
- Read, or select a student to read, the section *An extraordinary thing*. Draw students' attention to the way the writer builds up a list that describes how different people were affected by the explosion and how this adds to the enormity and drama.
- Draw students' attention to the repetition of *no* in the paragraph *After it had covered ...* What is the effect of this repetition? Add 'dramatic repetition' to the list of narrative techniques.
- Continue reading *Back into the light*. Discuss the change in tense in the last two paragraphs, the use of direct address, the reminders of previous detail, and the rhetorical question at the end. Add them to the narrative techniques list: e.g. present tense used to contrast 'then' and 'now'; descriptive details build a picture of what happened; rhetorical questions allow the reader to guess the meaning (in this case, the possibility of history repeating itself).

Guided Reading

- Draw a two-column table with the headings *Fact* and *Dramatic Description*. Re-read the article, one paragraph at a time, with students taking turns to read.
- After each paragraph is read, record what is fact and what is dramatic description. For example, under *Fact*, suggest the phrase *one landowner had a channel built in 1594 ...*, and under *Dramatic Description*, suggest the phrase *a gigantic avalanche of fire ...*

Independent Activities

- Ask students to complete **Worksheet 2**. For students requiring further support, suggest they use the 'Facts' list from **Guided Reading** to question ideas.
- When they have completed their worksheet, select students to 'quiz' the class with their own questions. Have them make notes of the 'true' statements. ■