

Precis - *Under The Shadow of Vesuvius* by Mimi L. Thompson

Bridget Jones Diary and *Sophie's World* meet *Ben Hur* - on the beach. A gender-bending, genre-bending romp through the Bay of Naples in the first century BC. It covers a year or so in the lives of three Roman teenagers, Phoebe - the narrator - her younger sister, Julia, and their odd-ball friend, Claudia Vesta. Join them on their search for true love amid the mad, mad world of the Roman aristocracy. Parties and sex, of course, but also Epicurean philosophers, fascist politicians, international business-men, billionaire philanthropists, celebrity sportsmen and the Naples Mafia. And, of course, Catullus' most famous girlfriend. Expect excitement and mayhem, tears and laughter. And always expect the unexpected twist: in Baiae, nothing is ever at it seems. And nobody is who they claim to be.

In the crucial year of 43 BC, the three girls embark on their first holiday alone in the notorious town of Baiae, on the Bay of Naples. Famous as the party capital of Europe, it was a magnet for the rich and famous. It is also the home of Domina Metella, Phoebe's disgraced aunt, and hostess to the three girls during their stay in sin-city.

During the course of this 86, 000 word novel, we ride an emotional roller-coaster as our heroines fall in and out of love, with a variety of different men (and women).

For the past three years or so, Phoebe has enjoyed the agony of unrequited love for the blonde cherub, Marcus Junius. She has learnt on the grape vine that his bring-back-hanging- father has recently sent him to man up at the Misenum Naval Academy. As luck (fate?) would have it, Misenum is just up the coast from Baiae. Despite her sister's insistence that the boy is gay and her Aunt's hints that she knows him a worryingly Biblical sense, Phoebe is pinning all her hopes on a holiday romance.

Dis aliter visum. After some minor successes (including a sensuous swimming lesson in the sparkling Med) and a series of crushingly embarrassing episodes - and even a pregnancy - Phoebe has to accept that the boy really *is* gay and that the love of his life is a certain Shlomo, soulful denizen of the Naples Diaspora. To make matters even worse, it is soon revealed that Marcus has a very lucrative side-line as a gigolo to the bored *matronas* of the Capitol. By the end of the novel, Marcus has admitted to affairs (of a sort) with Aunt Metella, with Phoebe's own mother and with the terrifying business woman, Mrs Testifracta. So successful is this business that the boy is up for a prestigious award, most promising start-up or most

successful young entrepreneur.

By a similar quirk of romantic circumstance, another of Phoebe's childhood sweet-hearts will also be in Baiae for the whole summer. Marius Pulcher, the most beautiful man of his generation, has recently had something of a nervous break-down. He has fallen in with a grungy, intellectual crowd and spends all his days reading. His doting, mega-rich grandmother has bought him a villa on the Baiae cornice so that he can 'find himself' (and stop embarrassing his family). By virtue of their prior acquaintance, Aunt Metella sends Phoebe to have lunch with the beardy-weirdo in his cliff-top *palazzo*. Things do not go very well. Marius begins by telling Phoebe to fuck off and stop playing Lady Bountiful. He then breaks down and cries uncontrollably. Somehow, the day is salvaged, but Phoebe has no chance to admire the opulent residence or to sample the contents of Granny's vast wine cellar. Marius has become an Epicurean, an odd philosophy which he describes with great enthusiasm, and in great detail, to the bemused Phoebe. Partly out of pity, and certainly against her better judgement, Phoebe agrees to accompany Marius to the nearby Garden of Epicurus. The very next day.

In the Naples Garden, we meet a variety of new characters, including the billionaire philanthropist, Titus Lucius Apis, and the perma-tanned it-girl, Melissa Constantine. We learn a lot about Epicurean philosophy and also about the feelings of both Marius and Phoebe for the long-legged Melissa. The day ends in a Bacchic, mini-orgy in Marius' sumptuous garden. Melissa is not, however, all she appears to be. Her sojourn in the Garden is just a front. She is no more of a philosopher than Phoebe. More than that, she is a two-timing cow, with links to both the Naples Mafia and fascist politics. She is also (apparently) the girl-friend of the world famous (erectily challenged) charioteer, Ajax.

Throughout the novel, Marius and Phoebe enjoy an on-off relationship, constantly blighted by the spectre of Marcus Junius. It is only when Marius, in a burst of youthful idealism, marches off to fight for the Republicans that Phoebe realizes the depths of her feelings for the troubled young man. This slow realization is revealed in a series of poignant letters, sent to and from the Front.

Phoebe's younger sister, Julia, is a sex-mad sixteen year-old, ready for anything and everything that Baiae has to offer. When we first meet her, she is in the throes of a typical teeny-bop obsession with the celeb charioteer, Ajax. Imagine, then, her swooning excitement when his chariot passes them on the Appian Way and she realizes that he, too, is bound for Baiae!

Excitement mounts yet further when she finds him at the same party as her and the others. Such is his star-status, however, that a strict guest-list is in operation and poor Julia finds herself unable to get past the guards into his private room. But Phoebe - in kind big-sister mode - hits on the perfect ploy. Julia is disguised as a giant fish and wheeled into the Inner Sanctum. Initially disappointed by the lack of interaction with the fans, Julia is soon subjected the catastrophic revelation that Ajax is actually having an affair with their Mother!! The sisters leave the party in a state of shock. To say the very least.

But such is the character of the young girl that she soon bounces back from the trauma and starts a steamy affair with the Pepper Baron, an immensely rich business-man, twice her age. They first meet on his mega yacht-come-party-barge, during one of the all-night floating parties for which Baiae was justly famous. Their relationship has a very rocky start. On their first date, the PB takes Julia to a strip club on the island of Capri. While he joins some sinister looking 'business-men' - including Ajax and Melissa's father! - Julia learns the rudiments of pole dancing. Things go from bad to worse. During a day out at the Pompeii Circus, guests of the rich, rather common Mrs Testifracta, Julia comes to realize that her current *enamorado* is involved in an elaborate racing scam. Despite all this, however, and despite the worrying attention of the Mafia, Julia falls head over heels in love and eventually marries the Pepper Baron, whom we eventually discover is very much the good guy. By the end of the novel, after a few months in a safe-house, the power-couple are back in their very des-res, with five beautiful children.

Claudia has been Phoebe's best friend since forever. But she suffers two major handicaps - a face like a dried prune and an unfashionable quest for spiritual enlightenment. Naturally, she has never had a boyfriend and has zero interest in the Baiae party scene. She is constantly mocked by Julia and Marcus Junius, and even Phoebe becomes exasperated with the endless 'God-bollocks'. All in all, poor Phoebe does not have much of a holiday. By the end of chapter 4, she has been thoroughly duped by a gang of international furniture thieves, masquerading as an Indian guru and his slimy acolyte. Following an initial introduction at a crazy party, Claudia parts with substantial quantities of cash and her diamond tiara. The next day, having arranged for the guru to give a private meditation lesson at the home of Domina Metella, she ends up bound and gagged, as the thieves strip the house of absolutely everything.

Half-way through the novel, it seems as if the girl has at last found love, in the unlikely form of Lucius Titus Apis. Finally, thinks Claudia, is a man who shares my spiritual and intellectual interests. The couple meet in Cumae, home of the Cumaean Sibyl and supposed entrance to the Underworld. They talk late into the night about life, the universe and everything. Claudia is in seventh heaven, as she explains in a very frank letter to her mother. Phoebe

can see how happy her friend is, but is naturally worried by what she already knows about the aging Epicurean. Phoebe, alas, is proved right. Following a sticky dinner-party at Aunt Metella's, Apis is unmasked as con-man extraordinaire and the brains behind the racing scam. He is also a rapist.

The universal bleakness of Claudia's so-called holiday is momentarily relieved when she - along with the others - takes a mysterious drug procured by the perennial student, Marcus Junius. While the others embark on an uninhibited orgy, Claudia enjoys a mind-blowing spiritual epiphany, such that even Phoebe is momentarily impressed (and jealous). It is only after her return to Rome, however, that Claudia discovers her real self and her real route to lasting happiness - in the arms of her Amazonian ex class-mate Aurelia Spexis. In the final party-scene, Claudia comes out to all her friends and looks happier than ever in her life before.

A number of adult characters serve to illuminate and elucidate the main characters and their sexual/spiritual awakenings. The most important of these is the aforementioned Aunt Metella. *Prima facie*, Domitia Metella is simply an aging hippy. But we soon discover that there is much more to her than the next party. She is a deeply sensitive and empathetic woman, blighted by a horribly traumatic and destructive childhood (which she describes in heart-rending detail). Her relationship with Gremio, her estranged sister, the three girls and even her slaves reveal a warm-hearted, open-minded soul, who always thinks of others before herself. The only unfortunate episode is Phoebe's discovery of her aunt (apparently) having sex with Marcus Junius.

Metella is best friends with a wealthy freedman, called Gremio. Fans of the Cambridge Latin Course will appreciate these two names! In the course of the novel, Gremio is revealed as a very complex and rather sad character. His aristocratic wife despises him and eventually leaves him, taking their two daughters. To the playboys and playgirls of Baiae, he is simply the money behind the next party. But, as the ex-slave develops a surprisingly close relationship with Phoebe, we learn that he is so much more than a cardboard cut out noovo. He is a kind and sensitive man, with only two aims in life. The first is to set up a refuge for gay men. The second is to find his long-lost sister. By the end of the story, both noble aims have been achieved.

Phoebe's mother is another important character in the novel. It is, of course, her affair with Ajax that marks the catastrophic end to Gremio's party. In the following chapter, during an idyllic pic-nic in the Cumaean country-side, Aunt Metta tries to excuse her sister's behaviour by arguing that she is simply the victim of an unusually cruel and hard childhood. We hear about their emotional and physical abuse at the hands of their father, a doctrinaire Stoic of the very old school. Phoebe refuses to excuse her

mother and is seemingly proved right, when she later finds her mother *in-flagrante* with Marcus Junius of all people. Worse is to come. Left alone in the family home on the Quirinal, Phoebe accidentally discovers her mother's very intimate diary, in which she details her affairs with Ajax and Marcus, her pregnancy and her hopes that Phoebe will foster the child. A bad lot through and through – like her husband – Phoebe's mother is a crucial foil to both her daughters and her sister.

While this novel is basically a coming of age of novel, with the emphasis very much on the light-hearted and the witty, it is a meticulously researched portrait the 1st century BC. We learn, for example, a great deal about the philosophy of Epicurus, about Stoicism and about the terrible civil wars that marked the end of the Roman Republic. While this is, of course, a work of fiction, various real-life Romans make amusing, cameo appearances. In the course of the story, we meet Cicero, Catullus, Clodia Metelli and Horace. Finally, for those who have ears to hear, there are countless references to works of Greek and Latin literature. For example, the early party scene, chez Gremio, owes a very great deal to Petronius' *Satyricon*. Phoebe's mother's sex diary is basically a mishmash of various erotic poems from the ancient world and the acolyte's description of the guru's magic powers is taken directly from ancient sources. The poems of Catullus, Ovid and Horace, and the speeches of Cicero, pepper the novel. On the other hand, one of the main aims of this story is to prove that there really is nothing new under the sun. While everyone knows that the themes of love and loss are universal, few will be aware that the noovo, the Mafia don, the business woman, the sporting celeb, the right-wing demagogue and the romantic novelist were stock characters of the ancient as well as the modern world...