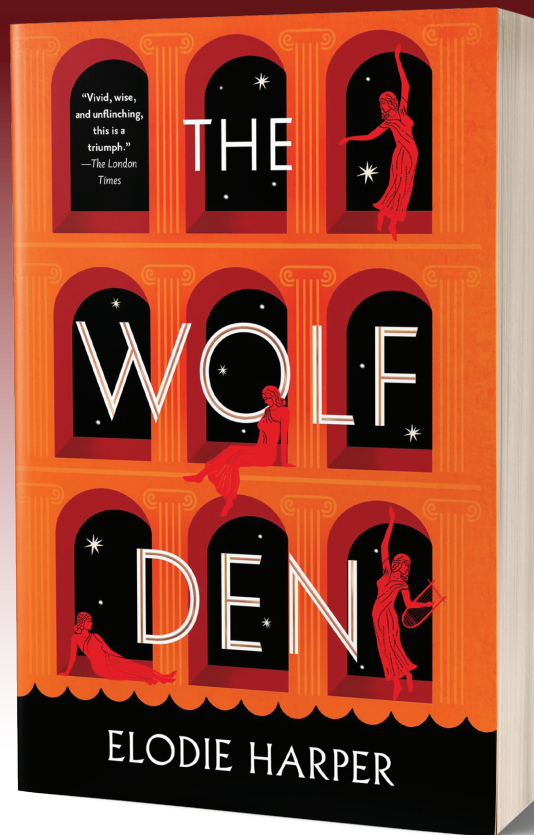


READING GUIDE FOR THE WOLF DEN



INTRODUCTION

Amara was once a beloved daughter in Greece, until her father's death plunged her family into destitution. Now, she is owned by a man she despises and lives as a slave in Pompeii's infamous brothel—her only value the desire she can stir in others.

But Amara's spirit is far from broken. Sharp, resourceful, and surrounded by women whose humor and dreams she shares, Amara comes to realize that everything in this city has its price. But how much will her freedom cost?

The Wolf Den is the first in a trilogy of novels reimagining the long-overlooked lives of women in ancient Pompeii's lupanar.



TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The five women in the brothel all have different ways of coping with the life they are forced to lead—for instance, Amara is angry and Dido is heartbroken, while Victoria embraces the situation as best she can. Who did you relate to the most? Whose behavior did you find the most difficult to understand? The women also all have very different relationships with one another—how did you feel about the ways they interacted? What did you think about Beronice's relationship with Gallus? What purpose do you think Fabia serves in the story?
2. Amara is forced to become more ruthless in order to survive the brothel and escape from slavery. Identify key moments in the book when you trusted her judgment and others when you doubted her. Were you always sympathetic to her decisions? How might you have reacted in her place? Do you think it is true that we are only as good as the choices we face? Do you think Amara and Felix have similarities and, if so, what are they?
3. We learn more about Felix, the violent, abusive pimp throughout the novel. Did your impression of him change when you learned that he too had suffered and been abused? Do you think he is a character who will ever find redemption? His dynamic with Amara also becomes increasingly complicated as the book progresses. What do you think might happen to their relationship over the course of the trilogy?
4. We learn late in the novel that Victoria is in love with Felix. Were you surprised by this? How did it change your view of the tough front Victoria presents to the world? We also only ever see Victoria's relationship with Felix through Amara's unsympathetic eyes—how do you think Felix might really feel about Victoria?
5. Amara has relationships with a number of men in the book, which range from a romantic one with Menander to an abusive one with Felix, but the person she loves the most is Dido. Do you think their friendship is the real love story of the novel? What did you feel about the way the two women loved and supported each other? How important is female friendship in the world of *The Wolf Den*?
6. Britannica is wholly different in her attitude and behavior from all the other women. She demonstrates total resistance and noncompliance, and creates division among the other she-wolves. Identify the ways each woman responds to her. Why do you think Britannica makes Victoria feel so angry and Amara so uncomfortable? Why do you think the author introduced Britannica into the story?



7. *The Wolf Den* follows the trope of the prostitute “saved” by a wealthy man, in an echo of other traditional love stories such as the Julia Roberts film *Pretty Woman*. What is different about the way that trope is handled here? Is Rufus a likable romantic hero? Does Amara really love him? Is it even possible for two people to love each other when one has all the power? Do you think we still romanticize a wealth/power imbalance between men and women?
8. The author starts each chapter with a quote from a Roman text or Pompeii graffiti. In what ways did this add to the story? Were there any particular quotes you remembered or enjoyed?
9. A key turning point in the book is Amara’s meeting with Pliny. Think about ways in which this section marked a change in the atmosphere and pace of the story. Amara clearly idolizes Pliny—but do you? Why do you think he initially rejected her, and why does he buy her freedom in the end?
10. The book focuses on women but also highlights the hardships enslaved men faced too, through the main characters Menander and Paris and the minor characters Nicandrus and Philos. Think about each of these men in turn—what do they have in common, and how are their circumstances different? Did you have sympathy for Paris? Do you think Menander and Amara ever had a chance of happiness?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Think about some of the festivals in the novel. The Saturnalia was the Roman precursor to Christmas, with gift-giving, parties, and evergreen decorations. Try holding a Saturnalia party at home! You could even try dressing up in Roman outfits.
2. The Roman poet Ovid’s *Art of Love* is a text that is often quoted in the novel. Have a night reading some of his advice to lovers aloud. Is any of it similar to modern dating advice?
3. Watch a TV show or movie set in the Roman era (bonus points if you spot any aspects of life that are also depicted in the novel).



A CONVERSATION WITH ELODIE HARPER

What made you write this story, and why did you choose this time period and specifically Pompeii?

The brothel in Pompeii is such an iconic stop on the tourist trail with all its erotic frescoes, and yet so little—even today—is said about the actual women who worked there. I wanted to think about what their lives might have been like, not focusing on the sex work but on their hopes and dreams and how they might have seen themselves. Pompeii is such a wonderful place to set a historical novel because so much survives—you barely have to invent anything! The wheel ruts in the road, the marble counters in the taverns, and all the amazing frescoes and mosaics. It is such a colorful, evocative site.



What fascinated you about the history of Pompeii? What are its peculiarities?

Vesuvius did not decide what was “worth” preserving when it erupted and so the site is unique for capturing so many aspects of ordinary people’s daily lives, some of them not very glamorous. We can see this even with recent archeological discoveries in Pompeii, such as the so-called slaves’ room, and all the graffiti. It is also how we have the only surviving purpose-built brothel from the ancient world, the *lupanar*, which I used as the starting point for *The Wolf Den*. The volcanic eruption also captured the luxury and extraordinary wealth and art at the opposite end of the social scale, which I drew on to describe Amara’s ascent through Pompeii’s society.

You chose the names of the protagonists from the graffiti, right? What do these women symbolize?

Beronice, Cressa, and Victoria are all real women who worked at the brothel, according to its graffiti. “Beautiful Paris” was also likely a brothel worker, and Felix may have been the name of either a client or a sex worker. Victoria, in particular, left some interesting lines, often describing herself as a conqueress, something I reflected in the novel. There are also drawings—a face, a ship, a bird—that the women might have carved in idle moments between customers. I found this very poignant. The women in my story are my attempt to imagine the inner lives of the real women who once worked in the *lupanar*.



What elements of your protagonist do you see in modern women?

Amara is only as “good” as the choices presented to her; she has to make some very challenging decisions, given the limitations of her life. I think all of us have to do this, though hopefully most of us have easier circumstances! There was no feminism in the ancient world, so I was careful not to give her modern sensibilities about female equality, but enslaved people back then wanted better for themselves—they wanted agency and to be free. We have ample evidence of this. These are timeless human emotions, for men and women, and so I made Amara somebody who was determined to survive and to make a better life.

What was the role of women in the society of the time in Pompeii?

Not great, compared to modern life, but far from being the worst in the ancient world. A free Roman woman’s primary role was expected to be as a wife and mother, subject to the authority of the male paterfamilias—but there is also evidence women had other roles in Pompeii. For instance, some were clearly successful in business, like Julia Felix, a real woman who I made into a character in the second book of my trilogy. Wealthy women and priestesses are also celebrated in civic buildings in Pompeii, suggesting they played a role in the political and commercial life of the town, even if they could not vote or run for office. At the bottom of the social scale, it was a different story. Enslaved women had a very hard time, with no agency over their lives or bodies. The Romans were also enormously prejudiced against older women, something I reflected in the character of Fabia.

What messages do you want to convey through your book? Is it the struggle and solidarity of women?

This is definitely an important part of what I wanted to convey! I also think we have a tendency to gloss over the humanity of enslaved people—particularly women—in the ancient world, and I really wanted to try and imagine what life might have looked like from their point of view. Pretty much all the surviving texts from that era are by elite male writers, and I think it’s important to remember that theirs is not the only experience worth considering.

What made you change your writing style in this work?

When you read ancient Roman texts (like Martial or Catullus) or read the graffiti in Pompeii, it feels very fresh, irreverent, modern, and colloquial. This is the style I



wanted to write in, too. For the people living then, this was not a historic era, it was their daily life: it was modern.

How has your work as a journalist helped you in writing?

As a broadcast journalist working in the UK, I am legally obliged to be impartial, to represent all viewpoints fairly—and of course to be accurate! I think the habit of having to consider many different perspectives without passing judgment does give you a certain way of looking at life, which I find helpful as a novelist. As a journalist you are also always looking for a new angle, a story that has not been told before, which is what I tried to do with *The Wolf Den*, too.

Who are your favorite novelists?

This is a very hard question as I have so many! Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Charlotte Brontë are among my favorites. I do very much enjoy reading other reimaginations of the ancient world, too: in the past year I enjoyed Jennifer Saint's *Ariadne* and Nikita Gill's *Great Goddesses*.

Finally, if you could change something in the way women are treated in the modern world, where would you start?

This is such a huge question! The way women are treated can differ radically today depending on where you are born, your social class, your race, etcetera, but I do think that a universal issue is women's role as parents—the lack of support and respect they are given as mothers, the lack of affordable or high-quality childcare, and the notion that childcare or looking after the home is a solely female concern, and one of less value. I think if this caring work were valued more, and shared more equally between men and women, it would be an important place to start. And it would benefit men and children, too

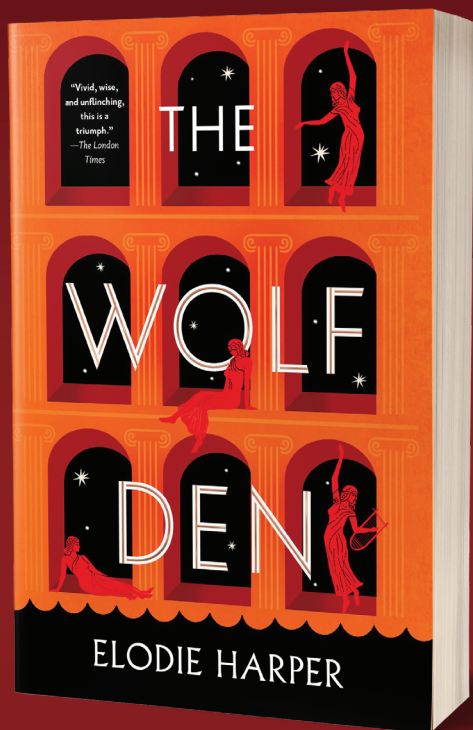


Illustrations by Holly Ovenden



THE WOLF DEN SERIES

by Elodie Harper

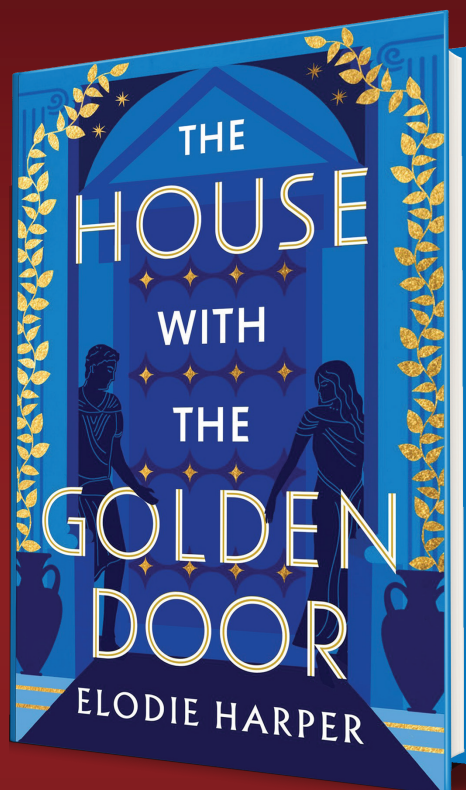


ISBN: 9781454946540

\$16.99 / \$22.99 CAN

Paperback • 488 pages

Audiobook Also Available



ISBN: 9781454946625

\$27.99 / \$36.99 CAN

Hardcover • 400 pages

U UNION SQUARE
& CO.



@unionsqandco