

Love to Read



The Thieves of Ostia

2001



Caroline Lawrence

A pacey, colourful, thrill-a-minute whodunnit which doesn't shy away from the gruesome gore of ancient Roman times. Some historical vocabulary will need to be explained.



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*Flavia Gemina solved her first mystery
on the Ides of June in the tenth year of the
Emperor Vespasian.*

*She had always had a knack for finding
things her father misplaced: his best
toqa, his quill pen, and once even his
ceremonial dagger. But this time there
had been a real crime, with a real culprit.*



Overview for teachers

Context

About the author

Although born in England in 1954, Caroline Lawrence's parents were American and she grew up in California. She studied Classics at Berkley University, but returned to England when she won a scholarship to study Classical Archeology at Cambridge University. Lawrence remained in England, took an MA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London and taught primary children for a short while afterwards. Since 2001 she has written historical fiction for children. Her first book, *The Thieves of Ostia*, was published in 2001 and is the first of her 'Roman Mystery' series combining the author's love of art history, ancient languages and travel. It went on to be made into a BBC TV series in 2007.

In 2009 she has won the Classical Association prize for 'a significant contribution to the public understanding of Classics' and in 2013 she was chosen to be President of the Joint Association of Classical Teachers following in the footsteps of Boris Johnson and Bettany Hughes.

She now lives by the River Thames in London.

What's the story about?

When her neighbour's guard dog is inexplicably beheaded, young sleuth, Flavia Gemina and her friends –Jonathan, a Jewish convert to Christianity, her slave Nubia and a street urchin, Lupus, who has had his tongue cut out – are determined to find out who is responsible. Following a lead from another neighbour, Libertus, a young handsome freedman of the wealthy Cordius, they suspect a sailor called Avitus, a pitiful man who they find deranged with grief by the death of his daughter, killed by rabid dogs. Though he may have motive, there is no evidence so Lupus follows Avitus around town, watching the poor man get steadily drunk in a series of taverns before throwing himself from the top of a lighthouse. However, in one of the taverns Lupus overhears a young man tell a company of gamblers that there is gold to be had at Flavia's father's home – the first bit of evidence that suggests Avitus is not the killer.

Meanwhile, as Flavia and the others leave the safety of their street to do a bit of sleuthing they find themselves getting into quite a few scrapes, having to flee danger, but fortunately managing to escape each time through their collective quick-wittedness.

When all four friends return home they discover that Cordius's dog has now been beheaded that afternoon which completely clears Avitus of any guilt. Perplexed and weary, the four retire and Lupus requests to stay spend the night at Flavia's home. However, in the middle of the night he is caught stealing gold coins from the storeroom – money which Cordius had secretly entrusted to Marcus. Though Flavia is shocked and upset by Lupus' betrayal, it confirms her suspicions that Libertus is the dog killer and his motive is to steal the gold. So, with the help of Mordecai, Jonathan's father, she decides to lay a trap for the dog-killer/thief and Libertus is caught 'red-handed'.

With the mystery solved and Libertus apprehended, Flavia holds a party, but does not invite Lupus, though changes her mind after Mordecai persuades her to forgive him, reminding him of his difficult life and their own transgressions. At the party Flavia explains how she solved the mystery with 'imagination and reason', Cordius gives each child a gold coin as a reward and Flavia's father, Marcus, invites everyone to go on holiday to his brother's farm in Pompeii... where no doubt another mystery will await them!

Themes to look out for

- Attitudes to Christianity
- Forgiveness
- Class
- Social and cultural differences
- Tolerance
- Greed
- Need
- Exploitation
- Life during ancient Roman times



Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Flavia

A natural leader, intrepid Flavia is of the equites Roman class and is clever, tenacious and oftentimes a cunning young girl. Her father relies upon her and her friends are persuaded by her. Using ‘imagination and reason’ to solve crimes, she is a true detective. Flawed, she can be a little thoughtless, jealous and bossy, but she is inherently and instinctively humane, kind-hearted and sympathetic to those around her.

Jonathan

Asthmatic Jonathan is a source of thoughtful cheeriness and provides much of the humorous bravado in the story. Like Flavia, he is brave, quick-witted and caring. Unlike Flavia, he does not agree with the idea of slaves. Indeed, his conversations with Flavia sometimes act as a platform for the author to present themes that run through the novel, for example the idea of trust, responsibility and religion. Jewish by birth, he is treated as an outcast by many after his family converted to Christianity – historically considered a radical sect.

Nubia

A beautiful and graceful African slave bought by Flavia with her birthday money with the intention of caring for her and then setting her free. Little is known of Nubia’s history, but it is evident she has an instinctive intellect for the morality and intentions of others as well as having a spiritual affinity with animals – qualities that have saved the four young detectives on more than one occasion.

Lupus

A pitiable creature, Lupus – the Roman word for ‘wolf’ – lives on the street and as a result is able to live on his wits. Little is known of his history too although it obviously involved violence since he has had his tongue cut out. It is soon discovered that he is a bright boy and a talented artist. He too is a flawed character since he surprisingly takes the opportunity to steal gold from Flavia when she kindly invited him to stay. He is quickly forgiven though after Jonathan’s wise father, Mordecai, explains to the children why he behaved the way he did.



Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



The setting, in the coastal town of Ostia, Rome, in the year 79 AD, is like a history lesson without being taught. There are lots of historical details and vocabulary (much of which is not explained in the narrative, thankfully) which helps to create an atmospheric sense of time, place and culture. The references, if not understood, in no way impinge on the enjoyment of the story, which is spritely told.

The action is local to a few streets in Ostia and reflects the different strata of Roman society. Flavia's equestrian home is comfortable and has order, stillness and two slaves. Next door is Jonathan's home which is bohemian, exotic and points to an educated family who refuse to keep slaves on principle. Across the street is Cordius' home where a typically ostentatious display of wealth is evident in the mosaics, art work, huge atrium and large amount of slaves. In contrast to this, just a little further up the street, are the Roman 'slums', dilapidated apartments crammed with families. Outside of their homes, the street is portrayed as a dangerous place. Dogs attack in the graveyard and brawls break out in the harbour. The harbour is the most dangerous place of all; a loud, busy place where even the fog is 'peevish' and the men are 'ugly', 'mangled' and 'meaty'. It is no place for children, but they are often placed there to add a sense of drama and unease to the story.



Narrative techniques

Although written in the third person, it is Flavia's character whose point of view we see the action of this plot-driven novel from...most of the time. The reader gets to see her inner thoughts and feelings more than any other character in the story. However, there are a couple of times when the narration changes viewpoint. On the odd occasion, it adopts an omniscient style instead. For example, in *Scroll XI* when Flavia and Lupus wear disguises to visit the suspect Avitus at his home, the narrative describes them using the common noun instead of their proper names: 'A girl and a boy stood outside a house with a red door...'. As a result, the reader is forced to watch the action from afar for a moment, adding to the suspense and vulnerability of the characters. This voyeuristic style distances the reader from the characters, emphasising the idea that the children are not recognisable anymore since they have adopted a disguise.



Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



A fast-paced novel, fairly typical of the detective structure. The reader is presented with the criminal act, the subsequent investigation and the denouement where the lead detective, in this case Flavia, describes who the culprit is and how she managed to solve the crime. Inextricably intertwined within the criminal investigation are cliffhangers, clues and red herrings aplenty, creating a suspenseful read and an interest in character as detective, criminal and person. To add to the mystery, the reader is presented with as much information – or partial information (Lupus, like the reader, only hears part of a key conversation in a tavern) – as the young detectives in the story, giving the reader an equal, competitive chance of solving the crime.

Language

A vehicle for introducing children to the history of ancient Roman times, the author brings the time redolently alive through her descriptions of character, setting and prolific use of historical detail, often without explanation though with enough context for the reader to guess at meaning. For example, the author describes how 'a woman was washing nappies in the impluvium...'

As befits the mystery genre, the story is also given a sense of suspense and tension. One typical example is in *Scroll III* when the reader is about to meet an obvious villain, Venalicius, the slave trader, for the first time. This is achieved through the choice use of adjectives and adverbs: 'Figures loomed', 'terrifying men'; use of sound effects - 'crack of whip', 'clink of chains', description of unsettling weather - 'the mist swirled around them...[and] the fog grew thicker and damper'. Later, when the children are running away from him and his men in *Scroll XV*, descriptive language is exchanged for snappy, short sentences to give a sense of action and danger: 'Another step. He was almost there. Suddenly he heard a cry to his left...They were running toward him.' and exclamation marks 'It was one of Venalicius's men!' Another technique to create a sense of tension is the use of questions. In *Scroll XIX*, after hearing 'a man's cry', the narrative asks 'Caudex?' followed by Flavia whispering 'Nubia?...Alma?' The lack of responses adding to the drama.

Special feature

Detective genre

The detective genre is a relatively recent literary format, arguably starting with American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, in his 1841 novel 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'.



It is a genre where a memorable detective, either amateur or professional, must navigate through a series of plausible clues and red herrings using reason and logic to solve a crime, with nothing to gain other than the satisfaction of deducing whodunnit and why. Detective stories have created some of the most memorable characters in literature: Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Tin Tin, the Famous Five and now Flavia!

Here are some of the key rules of detective fiction you may want to consider when writing your own detective novel.

1. The reader must have the same opportunity as the detective for solving the crime. The reader must get the same evidence at the same time as the detective. Red herrings are allowed, but only if the detective is similarly deceived as well.
2. There must be no love interest.
3. The detective must never turn out to be the culprit.
4. The culprit must be discovered by logical deduction rather than accident, coincidence or unmotivated confession.
5. The crime must be solved by natural rather than supernatural means.
6. The culprit must be someone who has played a role in the story.
7. There must only be one culprit.
8. The motives for the crime must be personal.
9. The detective must explain how the crime was solved at the end of the story identifying the criminal's motive, method and opportunity.
10. The crime must be significant - a murder or grand theft is usually ideal.
11. All the suspects, including the criminal must be presented early on in the novel and not slipped in at the last minute.

As you read *The Thieves of Ostia*, see how many of the rules Caroline Lawrence follows!



Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

Social and historical context

Research customs, buildings, society, people, medicine, religions and ideas during Roman times.

Find out about the history of the detective story and the typical elements of a detective story.

Research the history of slavery. What are the earliest and latest examples you can find?

Facts

Where is Ostia?

Who was the Emperor Vespasian and when was he alive?

When is the Ides of June?

What is a scroll?

Who were Castor and Pollux?

What is an atrium?

What is a bulla and what does it represent?

Pictures and objects

Examine a picture of a harbour, a Roman villa, a lighthouse, a graveyard and a tavern. Describe each setting and think about how they may link together.

What story might they tell?

Show the children a picture of a dog and tell them that someone is going around killing them. Ask them to imagine they are a detective. How would they go about solving the crime? What tools might they need? What steps would they take?

You could show the children a series of photos of people and ask them to pick the criminal explaining the reasons for their choice.

Debate

What is slavery and why does slavery exist in society?

How important is family to your identity?

What does the word 'forgiveness' mean to you? How important is forgiveness in life? What might life be like if we never forgave one another?

What do you believe in?



During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques

1

Read to the end of *Scroll II*

Focus on...

- First impressions
- How the setting reflects character
- Genre



Things to discuss

Character: What are your first impressions of Flavia? What do you like about her? Does she remind you of anyone you know? What characteristics does she share with other heroines of novels you have read?

Which character's point of view does the story follow? Why do you say that?

How would you describe Flavia and her father's relationship?

From the way Jonathan speaks and from his actions, what do you learn about him as a character?

How is Mordecai presented? Look at the way the dogs react to him, the way he is dressed, what he says and does. How do you feel towards him? Is he a man to be feared? Why do you say that?

Setting: Flavia's home is very different to Jonathan's. Look at the way each is described. What do they reflect about the two families, their personalities and way of life?

How does the author create a sense of being in ancient Rome? What words or phrases are used that are distinctly of that time?

Language: What does the word 'wincing' suggest about the way Flavia feels when she is told her father's signet ring has gone missing?

What do the words 'murmured' and 'distractedly' reveal about the way Flavia's father is feeling when he tells Flavia that it the ring is 'one of the few things of hers I have left.'

Find the word the author uses to first introduce the magpie. What does the word 'something' suggest about the magpie? What did you imagine the 'something' might be?

Look at the adjectives the author uses to describe the dogs. How do they make the dogs seem? What do they have in common?

Structure: How does the author create a sense of mystery in these two chapters?

How does the author set up a sense of danger when Flavia leaves her home to follow the magpie?

When Flavia leaves the safe confines of her home she takes 'a deep breath'. How do you think she is feeling at this point? What might her thoughts and fears be?

Story: What kind of story do you think this is going to be? What has the author done to make you say that? Do you think it will be a serious or humorous story?

Things to do

Describe a room in your own home. What does your room reveal about you as a family/person? Are there any words you have used that are typical of your time? Now draw a floorplan of your home and garden. Which part of your home or garden do you enjoy spending time in and why?

As you read *The Thieves of Ostia*, see how many of the rules of the detective genre Caroline Lawrence follows!

2

Read to the end of *Scroll V*

Focus on...

- Introduction of Nubia
- The world of ancient Ostia
- Creation of a sense of foreboding



Things to discuss

Character: How is Nubia presented? What does her treatment by the other characters tell you about them?

Why do you think Nubia feels a great affinity towards Scuto, the dog?

What do you think of Flavia's decision to buy Nubia instead of the scroll for her birthday?

What words would you use to describe the character of the slave-dealer, Venalicius? How does the author present him? Look at the way he is described, what he says and the reactions of Marcus and Flavia.

Setting: How does the author use the setting to create a sense of foreboding in *Scroll III*?

What do you learn about the customs and practices of ancient Ostia? In what ways is it similar to and different from the world of today?

How would you describe Ostia? Is it a place you would like to live? Why or why not?

Did anything shock you about the way Ostia was presented? Why was that?

How did the 'slave scene' in *Scroll III* make you feel?

What more do you learn about the customs of ancient Romans?

Language: Look at the words used to describe the fog in *Scroll III*. What impression does it give of the fog?

Highlight the words and phrases in *Scroll III* that show Venalicius is a frightening character.

Theme: Marcus tells Flavia in *Scroll V* that 'All the wealth in the world is no good if you do not have a family.' What do you think of this statement? How far do you agree/disagree with it?

Story: What mysteries have presented themselves so far in the story?

Whose blood do you think it is they find at the end of *Scroll V*? What do you think has happened?

Things to do

What's in a name? Look up the meanings of some of the character's names you have met so far. How apt are they? Find out where your name comes from and what it means. Does your name fit your personality?

Think of a place you know well. Write a descriptive piece bringing it to life. Think about the sights, smells, sounds. You might want to show how it changes at different times of day.

How good a detective is Flavia? Compare her to other famous literary detectives: Sherlock Holmes, Emil, Tin Tin, Miss Marple...Then create your own detective and write a profile for them.



3

Read to the end of Scroll IX

Focus on...

- Presentation of Lupus
- Whodunnit ingredients



Things to discuss

Character: Jonathan tells Flavia in *Scroll VI* that his father doesn't think 'it right' to keep slaves. What does this tell you about Mordecai?

What more do you learn about Jonathan?

Examine the way Lupus behaves and reacts. What does it tell you about him? What do you think is his history? How do you think he came to have his tongue cut out?

The reader learns a little bit about Lupus' background in *Scroll IX*. What more do his experiences tell you about life in ancient Ostia?

What do the reactions of the children to Lupus reveal about each one?

Story: Do you think Publius Avitus Proculus killed Bobus? Why or why not? What are the clues that point to his guilt? Does the author provide any other clues that it could be someone else? If so, who?

What shocked you most in this section?

Things to do

Research the Jews in ancient Rome. What prejudices might a Jewish person experience? Where does prejudice exist today and where does it stem from?

What makes you 'you'? Think about the events that have happened in your life. How have they shaped you as a person?

In preparation for writing your own detective story, invent a culprit and write a profile for them. What is the crime they commit, motive and opportunity? What characteristics do they possess?



4

Read to the end of Scroll XIV

Focus on...

- Creating a sense of unease
- Shift in narrative viewpoint



Things to discuss

Character: Who do you think the 'young man' in *Scroll XIV* could be? Why do you say that?

What are your thoughts on Libertus? Is there anything about him you find odd? Do you think he could be responsible for the death of Jonathan's dog? What clues suggest it could be him?

Was Jonathan right to disobey his father at the beginning of *Scroll XIII*? What might be the consequences of him breaking his father's trust? Was Flavia right to encourage Jonathan to disobey his father?

Setting: How does the description of the atrium and the subsequent walk to Avitus's home in *Scroll XI* add a sense of unease?

Narrative: Why do you think the narrator in *Scroll XI*, briefly refers to Flavia and her friends as simply 'A girl and a boy...another boy and girl'? Look at what they are doing in this section. How does the narrator want you to feel towards them?

Using the common noun 'boy/girl' rather than their names distances the characters from the reader. The reader becomes a voyeur to the action and tension is added as we watch the children from afar, unable to help them if something goes wrong. The use of the common noun also emphasises the fact that they are now in disguise or trying to camouflage themselves as they try to solve the mystery.

Structure: In *Scroll XIV*, the author shows Lupus overhearing a conversation. What effect does only hearing part of the action have upon you?

How would you describe the ending of *Scroll XIII*? Why do you think the author shifts narrative viewpoint in the next chapter, *Scroll XIV*? How did it make you feel about the story and the characters in the story?

Themes: What themes do you think are beginning to emerge?

Story: What do you think will happen to each character now?

Things to do

Draw Flavia, Jonathan, Nubia and Lupus and detail underneath each character's abilities and skills. How do they complement one another and why might they make a good team?

Working in pairs, imagine you are a Roman detective interviewing either Libertus or Avitus about the death of Bobos. Role play the scene. Do you think they are guilty or not guilty?



5

Read to the end of *Scroll XVIII*

Focus on...

- Creating a sense of action
- Use of contrast for dramatic purpose



Things to discuss

Character: In *Scroll XVII*, Mordecai looks ‘sharply at Jonathan...’ Why do you think he does this?

Language: What words or phrases create a sense of suspense at the beginning of *Scroll XV*? Look at the verbs used at the beginning of *Scroll XV*. What are the contrasts between them? What does the contrast add to the action or atmosphere of the story?

Would you describe the sentences as short or long at the beginning of *Scroll XV*? How do the short sentences at the beginning of *Scroll XV* add to the sense of drama?

Narrative: Although Callum is narrating the story, do you ever get to know what he is thinking or feeling?

Structure: The focus of the story changes a few times in this section, sometimes following Lupus, sometimes the others. Why has the author done this? What does it add to the story? What do the two experiences have in common, if anything? Whose experience was the most frightening or thrilling?

When Ativus committed suicide, did you feel you were looking at the action from afar or close to? Why do you say that? How did this make you feel about his death?

Look at the end of *Scroll XVIII*. What atmosphere does the author create as the children lie in bed? How does this contrast with the last two lines?

Story: What do you think Flavia has discovered at the end of this section?

What do you think has happened to make Nubia scream?

Have you read anything in this section that has confirmed or made you change your mind about who is responsible for the dogs’ deaths?

Things to do

Compose and write lyrics for Nubia’s Dog Song in *Scroll XVII*. Perform it – you may even want to have some people as the howling dogs!

Research into the history of Christians.

Think about an action sequence for your own detective story and write an outline plan.



6

Read to the end of the story

Focus on...

- The denouement
- Characterisation – realistic or not?



Things to discuss

Character: Were the children right to forgive Lupus?

How realistic do you think the characterisation in the story was?

Who were the flawed characters in the story? Is a flawed character more or less realistic?

How important is it to you to have realistic characters in a story?

After each child is given a gold coin, they each wish to spend it on something different. What do their choices say about them? Why do you think Lupus ‘had an odd smile on his face’? What do you think he might purchase? What would you purchase?

Who was your favourite character?

Structure: How does the author create a suspenseful atmosphere in *Scroll XX*, just before Libertus is caught?

How appropriate was the ending?

Language: Look at the questions used in *Scroll XIX*. What do they add to the story?

Story: How far did you enjoy the story?

Did anything you read disappoint you?

What was your favourite scene?

At what point in the story did you realise Libertus was the dog-killer?



After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel



Caught red-handed!

Libertus exclaims he was caught 'red-handed'. Find out the origins of this phrase. Think of other idioms you know and find out their origins.

Lupus or Nubia's story

Imagine you are either the character of Lupus or Nubia. Use your imagination to write their background story, describing their earlier life before the story began.

Film adaptation

The story has been made into a film. Why not shoot your own scene from the story using either people, puppets or animation? Think about script, music, costume and setting.

Whodunnit?

What makes a good detective story? Make a list of the main features based on your reading. Use the information collected to write your own detective story following some of the conventions set out in the 'Special feature' section.

Memorable quotes

'My seal! My amethyst signet-ring! The one your mother gave me!'

Flavia looked down, and her heart skipped a beat. At the foot of the tree were at least half a dozen wild dogs, all staring hungrily up at her!

'Great Neptune's beard!' he cried. 'What's happened to you? Look at yourself! Your arms are scratched, your hair full of twigs, you tunic torn and dirty, and - your ankle is bandaged! Whatever happened?'

'How can they treat them like that? Like animals,' murmured Flavia. Untying her coin purse, she began to move forward.

'Also,' said Captain Geminus, 'did you know that when a mistress invites her slave to recline, it means she is granting that slave her freedom?'

'All the wealth in the world is no good if you don't have a family.'

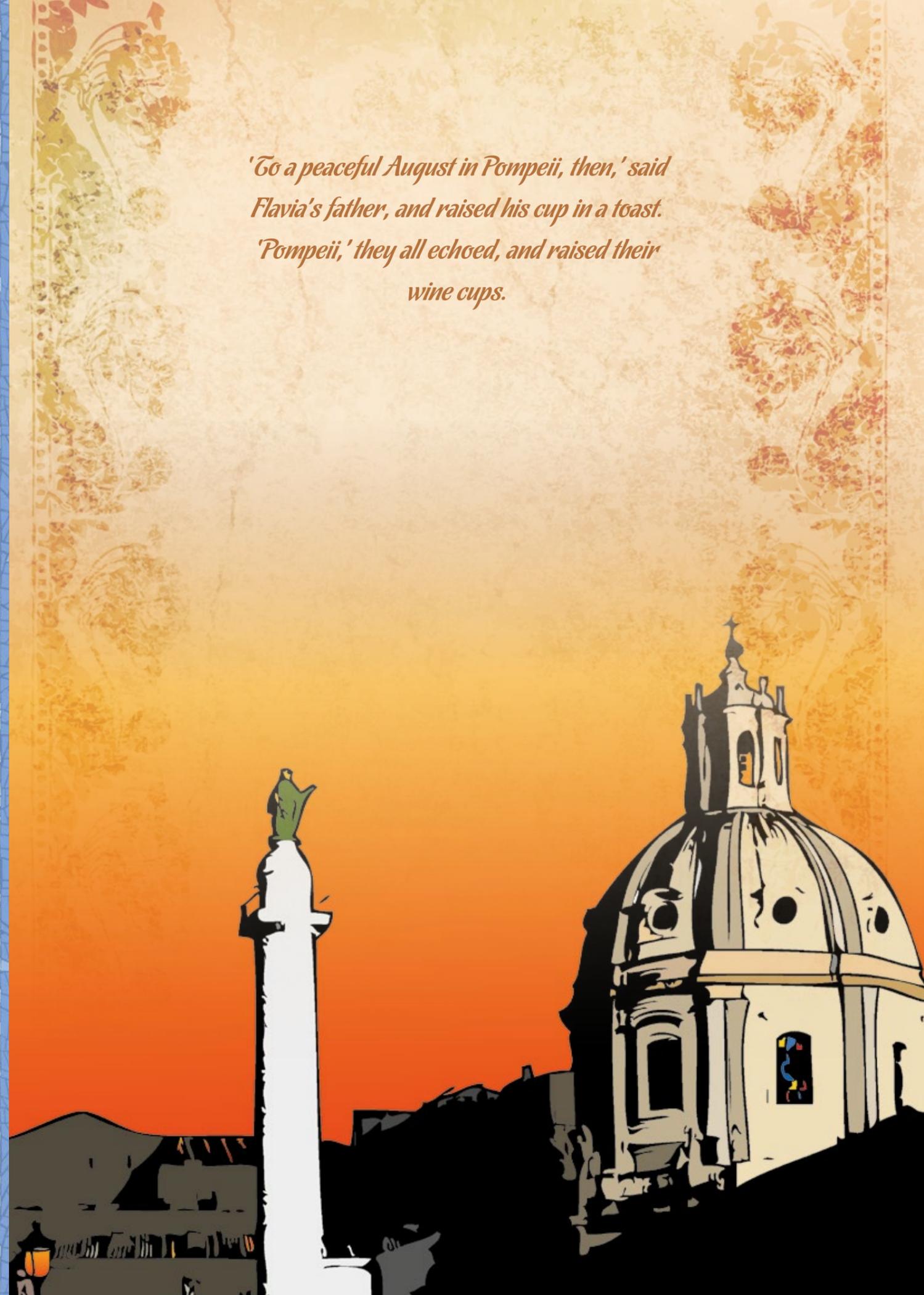
The harbour always made her feel both excited and sad. Excited because every ship promised a new adventure, sad because her father so often went away.

That was one advantage to being hungry all the time: it gave you an edge, an alertness. His sense of smell was always sharper if he hadn't eaten for a day or two. His eyesight was keener, too.

'A man!' the woman shrieked, dropping her net and pointing. 'There's a man on the lighthouse and I think he's going to jump!'

The corridor looked like a gaping throat ready to swallow her with shadows, so she ran down it as fast as she could.

'To a peaceful August in Pompeii, then,' said Flavia's father, and raised his cup in a toast. 'Pompeii,' they all echoed, and raised their wine cups.



‘From slave traders to criminal masterminds, Flavia Gemina and her fellow sleuths outwit a host of villains in these riveting Roman detective stories. No one is writing crime for children like Caroline Lawrence.’

Waterstones

‘Lawrence has succeeded in not only vividly and accurately recreating the world of ancient Rome, but has also written some really exciting, children-centred thriller stories...’

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