

In Ruins: A Journey Through History, Art, and Literature

By Christopher Woodward

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In this enchanting meditation on ruins, Christopher Woodward takes us on a thousand-year journey from the plains of Troy to the monuments of ancient Rome, from the crumbling palaces of Sicily, Cuba, and Zanzibar to the rubble of the London Blitz. With an exquisite sense of romantic melancholy, we encounter the teenage Byron in the moldering Newstead Abbey, Flaubert watching the buzzards on the pyramids, Henry James in the Colosseum, and Freud at Pompeii. We travel the Appian Way with Dickens and behold the Baths of Caracalla with Shelley. An exhilarating tour, at once elegant and stimulating, **In Ruins** casts an exalting spell as it explores the bewitching power of architectural remains and their persistent hold on the imagination.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
"If I am lonely in a foreign country," confesses Woodward, director of Britain's Holburne Museum of Art, " I search for ruins." Great houses and haunted ones, ruins of antiquity and of modern wars, suburban remnants and monastic shells form his terrain in this erudite, brisk and invigorating walk through lost domains. "Ruins do not speak," says Woodward, "we speak for them." In this compact but capacious book, Woodward brings forth the voices of architects, diarists, sculptors, eccentrics, archeologists, even a boxer. Woodward himself is present, sometimes traveling, sometimes reading, but never as an intrusive presence. Although Byron may have felt "the air of Greece" made him a poet, Woodward is certain that it was "the clammy mists of a ruined English abbey" and the effects are present in his own heightened, engaging prose, which often finds literary ghosts among the stones. From Virginia Water in Surrey, the largest artificial ruin in Britain, to Ninfa ("the loveliest lost city in Europe") and the real life inspirations for the abodes of Miss Havisham, the Ushers and Ozymandias, Woodward ventures to Ephesus (where St. Paul preached) and the magnificently over-designed John Soane's Museum, London (where he served as curator). The Roman Coliseum morphs from terrifying entertainment arena to cow pasture and stone quarry to major tourist attraction visited by, among the many, Hawthorne and Hardy. If "[a] ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator," this book listens in intently.-- ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator," this book listens in intently.
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From Library Journal
The ruins of majestic buildings, monuments, or colossal figures have long been objects of contemplation and sources of creative inspiration. They are reminders of the vulnerability of empire, the fragility of artistic endeavor, and the transience of human ambition. Woodward, director of the Holburne Museum of Art (Bath, England), visits the remains of the Roman Colosseum, deteriorated English abbeys and monasteries, neglected mansions of Cuban sugar barons, and the abandoned palaces of the Moorish princes of Sicily and the sultans of Zanzibar, charting the impact of such decay on the literature and art of the 16th to 20th centuries. As images, symbols, or motifs, they have informed the canvases of Piranesi and Constable, the poetry of Shelley ("Ozymandias") and Byron ("Childe Harold"), and the fiction of Poe ("Fall of the House of Usher"), to cite only some of Woodward's many representations. In this penetrating study Woodward also elaborates on the 19th-century European gentry's fancy for commissioning landscape architects to create contemplative false ruins, or "follies," amid their woodland estates. Recommended for all libraries.
Lonnie Weatherby, McGill Univ. Lib., Montreal
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From The New Yorker
In 1462, Pope Pius II praised classical ruins for their "exemplary frailty" and issued an edict to protect them; in the centuries that followed, generations of writers have delighted in their melancholy power. Woodward, a young British architectural historian, claims to have been obsessed with ruins since childhood; here he interweaves personal reflections (which hover just this side of preciousness) with historical descriptions of actual ruins—castles, follies, blitzed London, and, above all, Rome—and the writers and artists who have been captivated by them. For the true connoisseur, it seems, nothing ruins a ruin like repair. Rome, Woodward says, has failed to inspire anyone since the late nineteenth century, when archeologists cleared away the detritus of two millennia. The Colosseum was once dotted with shrines and sprouted rare plants whose seeds had been sown from the bodies of the exotic animals killed there. Now it is "as bald as the

foundations of a modern construction site."
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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