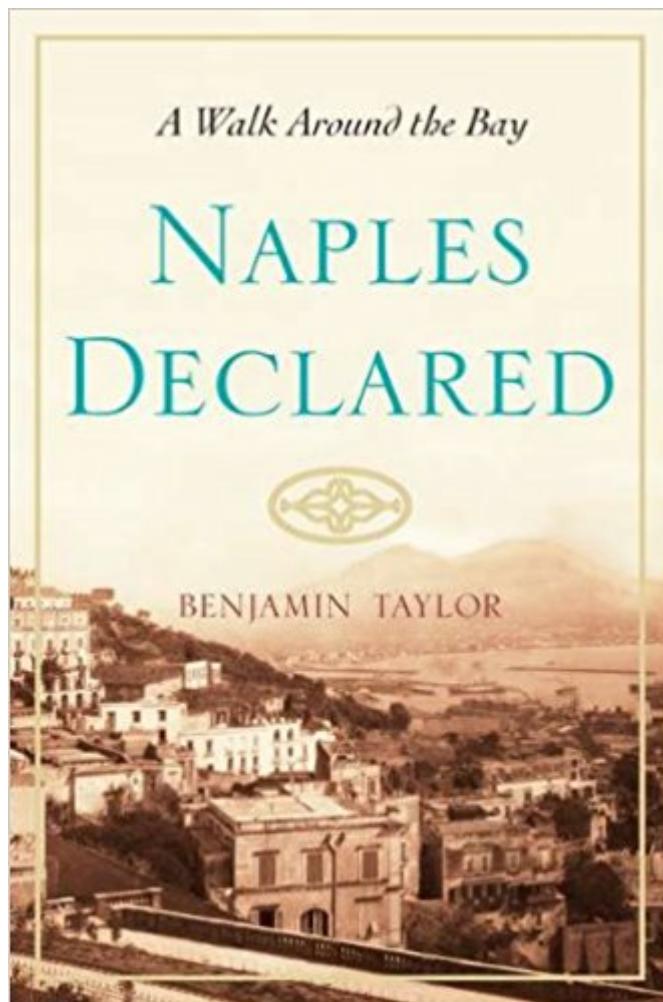


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Naples Declared: A Walk Around The Bay



Synopsis

It is a city of seemingly irreconcilable opposites, simultaneously glorious and ghastly. And it is Ben Taylor's remarkable ability to meld these contradictions into a whole that makes this the exciting and original book it is. He takes his stroll around the bay with the acute sensitivity of a lover, the good humor of a friend, and the wisdom of a seeker who has immersed himself in all aspects of this contrapuntal culture. His curiosity leads him to many byways, both real and metaphoric, and his passion for this ancient city and its people becomes, in his graceful prose and amusing anecdotes, irresistibly contagious.

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Customer Reviews

“Splendid.” - Stacy Schiff, author of Cleopatra: A Life There is no more witty, worldly, cultivated or amiably candid observer imaginable than Benjamin Taylor. This book belongs on the shelf of the very best literary travel guides.- Phillip Lopate, author of Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan Erudite and charming, Naples Declared is remarkable book; it's about place and history and survival; it's fresh, it's wise, and it's not to be missed. -Brenda Wineapple, author of White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson “From novelist/essayist/editor Taylor, an idiosyncratic, atmospheric portrait of the great open-air theater of Europe.” The author wears his formidable erudition lightly as he cites classical authors and 20th-century travel writers with equal zest and acuity. Yet some of his most enjoyable pages are present-day encounters with a fervently communist doctor, with a chain-smoking student of Faulkner, and with novelist Shirley

Hazzard, one of Naples many devoted longtime, part-time residents. Packed with elegant aperçus and vibrant with the author’s rueful understanding that Naples the glorious and Naples the ghastly have always been one place, Taylor’s [in his] highly personal book the Neapolitan spirit is palpable. • Kirkus starred review “Taylor’s book, like his subject, Naples, is a lot of things at once; there are lengthy discussions of history, philosophy, religion, art, culture, literature, customs. The book meanders between past and present, wanders in stream-of-thought fashion through the Naples streets, delves deeply into the city’s stories, lives, and lore, and drops in for conversations with locals; it is an accurate representation of what travel is and what it means. Scholarly and insightful and balanced with wit and levity, [Naples Declared] is written with an effortless poeticism. • Library Journal “Superb . . . What Chatwin did for Australia and Mathiessen for the Himalayas, Taylor now does for the storied city of Naples. I will steal a line from Leon Wieseltier’s review of Taylor’s previous book, “Saul Bellow: Letters” to describe his newest one: “an elegantissimo book.” [In Naples Declared,] Taylor deftly sums up more than 3,000 years of history, ranging from the establishment of a Mycenaean entrepôt in 1800 B.C.E. to the signal event of 2011: “Renewed garbage crisis.” Like all great travel memoirs, however, Naples Declared owes some of its best moments to the firsthand experiences of the author in the place he writes about. He is a watchful traveler and a charming raconteur, and so we are treated to accounts of his successful effort to cure the hiccups of an aristocratic Englishwoman known to the hotel staff as “Lady So-and-So,” his inventory of the cast-off items and the poignant graffiti that he spots in an ancient aqueduct used as a bomb-shelter during World War II . . . Taylor’s book offers a full measure of history and reportage. “My modus operandi,” he explains, “has been to walk a knowledge of Naples into my bloodstream.” But the book is also a reverie. “In this place, my dream said, trust to the promise of renewable wonder,” he concludes, “every lover’s hope and prayer.” There is no better way to sum up what Taylor has captured in “Naples Declared,” a wholly delightful example of what the literary travel memoir can achieve.”--Jonathan Kirsch, JewishJournal.com

Benjamin Taylor is the author of two acclaimed novels—*The Book of Getting Even* and *Tales Out of School*—and the editor of *Saul Bellow: Letters*, called by *The New York Times Book Review* “an elegantissimo book. Our literature’s debt to Taylor is considerable.”

Naples Declared must rate among the top travel journals ever written. The author gives the reader a nice tour of the more interesting sites in Naples, so for that reason alone the book can be read by anyone thinking of traveling there. However, you also get a get some well-informed and sometimes philosophical observations about the city, its inhabitants, and all that city has to offer. You cannot understand Naples without having some vague idea of its history. Italian politics are complicated and convoluted generally, only more so in the case of Naples. Only Sicily can compete with it on that score. The politics of Italy right before and just after the renaissance is daunting to learn, but Italian history, particularly in the south, began long before that efflorescence. If you are not already familiar with the history of southern Italy, you will be surprised to learn who ruled its various parts in the past. The first were the Greeks, who had established ports and cities by the eighth century BCE (some say as early as the second millennium BCE). Greek culture, we are reminded by the book, persisted for a long time after Greek hegemony ended. Naples and its culture, art and architecture, were influenced to some extent, sometimes more, sometimes less, by all who came from afar to dominate it at any point in time: Romans, Saracens, French, Spanish, Germans, Papal, Sicilians and other Italic intruders, etc., as Prof. Taylor will inform us. He deftly weaves the history of Naples and its various cultures into his narrative. The Greek language was the lingua franca of Naples and its neighbors, including Sicily, just across the bay from Naples, and most of the rest of southern Italy, for over 1000 years, and continues to be spoken, in a dialect called Griko, in parts of Calabria and Salento today. Most of Southern Italy was called Magna Graecia at one time. It was conquered by the Romans in the third century BCE after having previously been captured by the Samnites. Naples was then captured by the Ostrogoths, one of the migrating German tribes, and was briefly a part of the Ostrogoth Kingdom. Naples was sacked by the Saracens around 850 CE, whose stay was not lengthy. However, the Saracens did rule most of neighboring Sicily, and continued to influence Naples for many years before and after Naples' sacking. Next came the Normans (who were originally from Scandinavia, as the name suggest). Yes, these were the same Normans who conquered England in 1066. After that came the Hohenstaufens, from Germany of all places. Next came the Angevins (from Anjou in modern France), originally a Frankish tribe, who, if you are familiar with English history, succeeded the Plantagenet Kings of England, beginning with Henry II--do you remember the movie, *The Lion in Winter*. After that, Naples became part of the Spanish Kingdom of Aragon. Next came the Austrian Habsburgs and the Spanish Bourbons. Napoleon's brother Joseph was crowned

King of Naples for a while. It is safe to say that the city of Naples had a colorful history, and Naples Declared gives you tangible glimpses of that history, reflected in modern Naples through the author's discussions of its art, architecture, and society, all of which are a product of the varied peoples and cultures with whom Naples came in contact over its more than 2500 years as a city. See the very brief synopsis above. Naples Declared is not a history book, but because each succeeding ruling class influenced modern Naples, the author tells you the least you need to know to give his observations a suitable context. He does this adroitly. We get to experience the author's personal reflections on Naples, along with his ruminations about various episodes of his life, spurred to consciousness by the city. These are delightful, and not only offer a respite from the direct immediacy of Naples itself, but also we get a context in which to place the author's interpretation of Naples. The "death of the author," though the literary debate continues in the case of a novel, is a concept antithetical to a memoir, of which Naples Declared is in part. A memoir has to tell you something about the author. That is part of what makes it interesting. The interior life of this particular traveler/reporter/author is what makes this more than just a travel book, though it is both. Often we would just as soon not be exposed to a writer's inward thoughts, but in this case, the author's interior life is very interesting, and the reader feels grateful to be invited in.

Ben Taylor's *Naples Declared* is a brilliant, challenging read; part history, part art lesson, part memoir, part travel guide unlike any guide read. This is his Naples after eleven visits; the City of four Europes, Greek, Roman, Byzantium and "this strong smelling tribesmen, nations from the back and beyond, hell bent on conquest." Here is Vico, the philosopher, dinner with Shirley Hazzard, Capri and remembrances of Norman Douglas and Tiberius, Camus on German war atrocities. He ends with an art lesson comparing Jusepe de Ribera, follower of Caravaggio, and his painting of Prometheus, "as a just metaphor for Naples. The photos are in color and the bibliography extensive.

This is a fascinating, well written book by an erudite author who knows the history of Naples in depth and shares it with the reader. I intend to read it again, which I almost never do. I also look forward to our next trip to Naples & the Amalfi Coast.

An interesting and well-written travelogue/history of Naples. The author blends history, myth,

culture, and foodways into an entertaining picture of a fascinating city. Not part of the traditional "tour", Naples offers a unique picture of life in the South of Italy. For those of us who trace our heritage to the Mezzogiorno, it is a great read!

Travel narratives can be as good an experience as visiting the place the author is writing about but if you have visited the places under discussion one wishes the author would go to places that you found interesting. Naples Declared is a well-written book about the history, art and people of Naples. I was especially captivated by the introduction where Benjamin Taylor reflects the same apprehension I felt on going to Naples. The city has a reputation for being dangerous, so you need to hide your valuables and hope not to be robbed. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that Naples was nothing of the kind and the people are warm and friendly. Mr. Benjamin has some nice reflections on Naples and the Bay. He relates the history of the area well and has some thoughtful comments on the emperor Tiberius (stripping off much of the gossip reported by ancient writers) and an interesting comparison of Christianity and the cult of Mithras. The only discussion I found somewhat boring was Giambattista Vico. Philosophy is not one of the subjects I find compelling and I thought there was too much detail about Vico when there could have been more about Naples. We also meet some interesting people. There is Gabriella, who is trying to read William Faulkner, Edo the taxi driver and author Shirley Hazzard. The chapter on Capri was a joy. Mr. Benjamin describes the Europeans who became enamored with the island and left their mark, and provides nice descriptions of the Arco Naturale and Anacapri. He does not mention the Villa San Michele (built by Axel Munthe) which I found a bit odd given that it is such a well-known landmark. Perhaps it is too touristy but the view from the villa is second to none on the island. I did find many of the books mentioned by Mr. Benjamin to be interesting in themselves and something I wanted to investigate further. I have read Norman Douglas before but the discussion of him in the book was so fascinating it made me want to know more. I also was enchanted by the reference to Lampedusa's The Siren and Selected Writings. Naples Declared is a marvelous exploration of Naples that provides a good introduction for the would-be traveler and brings back memories for those of us who have experienced the city.

Well done. However, the author is so erudite I wonder whom he finds to talk his language? My ancestor, George Sandys, wrote a travelogue of his trip to Europe and the Holy Land in 1610 and I want to contact Mr. Taylor to ask if Sandys was accurate and where he got his information. How do I contact an author?

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