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Naples Declared: A Walk Around the Bay

By Benjamin Taylor
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Compared to that parvenu Rome, southern Italy's metropolis is "more ancient, less well-off...wiser, grander...glorious [and] ghastly," as well as the ideal setting for shaggy-dog repartee and philosophical ruminations, to judge by this beguiling travelogue. Taylor (*Into the Open: Reflections on Genius and Modernity*) offers a meandering, conversational account of 3000 years of Neapolitan history, one that veers off on interesting digressions from the origin of the alphabet to the fate of a lost American bomber crew but which always circles back to gossipy anecdotes about Roman emperors, medieval potentates, and latter-day literary figures and sexual outlaws. Meanwhile he leads readers on a journey through the modern city's cathedrals, poets' tombs, and famously finicky concert halls—a chorus of boos erupts when a harp recital strays into modernism—and periodically repairs to some café for impromptu debates with locals about everything from Faulkner to CIA conspiracies. (Naples's buried Greek heritage provokes Taylor's own opinionated musings on the superiority of pagan spirituality, which he greatly prefers to Christianity's "masochistic preoccupation with suffering, death and putrefaction" and "untragic view of life."). Steeped in off-hand erudition and raptly attuned to the city's scruffy allure, Taylor makes a charming guide to an under-toured city.