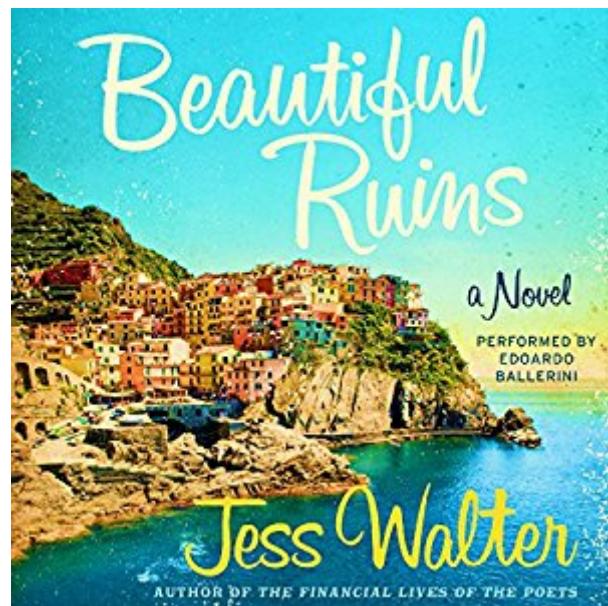


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# Beautiful Ruins



## Synopsis

Audie Award Nominee, Fiction and Best Solo Narration, 2013The story begins in 1962. On a rocky patch of the sun-drenched Italian coastline, a young innkeeper, chest-deep in daydreams, looks out over the incandescent waters of the Ligurian Sea and spies an apparition: a tall, thin woman, a vision in white, approaching him on a boat. She is an actress, he soon learns, an American starlet, and she is dying. And the story begins again today, half a world away, when an elderly Italian man shows up on a movie studio's back lot - searching for the mysterious woman he last saw at his hotel decades earlier. What unfolds is a dazzling, yet deeply human, roller coaster of a novel, spanning 50 years and nearly as many lives. From the lavish set of Cleopatra to the shabby revelry of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Walter introduces us to the tangled lives of a dozen unforgettable characters: the starstruck Italian innkeeper and his long-lost love; the heroically preserved producer who once brought them together and his idealistic young assistant; the army veteran turned fledgling novelist, and the rakish Richard Burton himself, whose appetites set the whole story in motion - along with the husbands and wives, lovers and dreamers, superstars and losers, who populate their world in the decades that follow. Gloriously inventive, constantly surprising, Beautiful Ruins is a story of flawed yet fascinating people, navigating the rocky shores of their lives while clinging to their improbable dreams.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Brief summary and review, no spoilers. This story is told in chapters that go back and forth in time,

starting in 1962 in a little Italian coastal town named Porto Vergogna (Port Shame.) Here we are introduced to a young man named Pasquel who's family owns the only small hotel in the village, the name of which translates to The Hotel Adequate View. Pasquale has big plans to make his village competitive with the successful coastal communities nearby and attract more tourists. The only American tourist who has visited the hotel before is a man named Alvis Bender, who comes every year for two weeks to work on a book - a book for which he has only written one chapter. But when a young beautiful actress named Dee Moray arrives to stay at The Hotel Adequate View, everything changes. As the book progresses we find out what happened to these characters over time and how their lives and the lives of so many others were changed as well. The other main characters include Claire Silver, a young, impassioned but disillusioned development assistant for a man named Michael Deane, who is an older and successful and legendary film producer. We also meet a young man named Shane Wheeler who wants to make a pitch about a movie about the Donner Party. Add to the mix an incredibly amusing and odd cast of characters both from the past and present. And did I mention Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor? I don't want to give away any more of the plot because it's such a joy to read this book to find out what happens next and how it all comes together. It's not just that this book is compelling and entertaining, it's also a mirror that reflects our culture and the way we think and live. It sounds so cliched but this book really did make me laugh - a lot - but it also made me think. And it made me cry. I cannot recommend this book enough. It's so so smart and beautifully written by someone who has such a gift of storytelling and observation. I've never read a book by Jess Walter before, but you can be sure I will go out and find his earlier work and read it now.

Sometimes one clicks with a book, and other times...well, for me this was one of the other times. About half way through I realized that I really didn't care about the cast of a thousand characters, and was distracted by the fact that the locale shifted with every chapter -- one chapter is in Hollywood in the present and in next chapter one is back in Italy in 1962. For me, there were too many characters and too many storylines. Others may not have an issue with my issues, but those are the reasons I finally set the book aside. The book also shifts from present to past tense almost with each chapter, which seems to be more and more common in current literature to the point where some consider it a fad. Fortunately, Jess Walter did not overdo the use of present tense and it ceased to be a distraction for me. I did like the character of Pasquale, and had the book been his story alone I would have found the book enchanting. The chapters set in Italy were in my opinion the best parts of the book (at least the book as far as I read it). The author has a good feel for the locale

and I found myself skimming the sections set in Hollywood to get back to Italy. Richard Burton put in a cameo appearance, and it didn't do much to dispell his image as a heavy drinker, which is probably accurate (certainly it is the way I remember him as being depicted at the time). I suspect this book will find its proper audience -- the reviews so far have been quite glowing. The fact that it didn't appeal to one particular reader is not the fault of the author -- it is just a fact of life that not every book is going to appeal to everyone.

The "beautiful ruins" of this affecting story include not only its physical setting, in a tiny coastal village destined for extinction (Porto Vergogna or the Port of Shame), but also the larger than life characters, including a "real" Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who appear as supporting actors to the main story of the more ordinary cast: the arrestingly beautiful blonde starlet Dee Moray and the young innkeeper who falls for her, Pasquale Tursi, and many many other memorable characters, their children, their friends, their colleagues. The novel moves back and forth in time between 1962 and a somewhat vaguely defined "recently." The juxtaposition made possible by this slippage in time serves to remind the reader that all things beautiful eventually become ruins and that many ruins (conversely) were once things of beauty. That double-focus is the source of much of the book's poignancy. The novel's many other, mostly youthful comic characters, associated with its second setting in contemporary Hollywood, do help to balance the book's almost unbearable sadness and lend it a sense of the future that keep it from tipping into tragedy. One character, the "dead-gazed" geriatric Michael Deane, miracle of plastic surgery, tells the haunting cautionary tale of what happens if one rejects the embrace of time. The result is a beautifully composed, highly entertaining philosophical novel, tightly unified despite its wide-ranging plot. I think the point of the final (title) chapter, which attempts to wrap up all the loose ends, is that, despite the pleasure such storytelling brings, it is finally impossible to harmonize all the notes, to make public all the private losses and gains. As the epigraph of that chapter, taken from Milan Kundera, reflects, nothing is "more obvious, more tangible, than the present moment. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact." I actually had to stop reading parts of the end of this book because I was crying so much I was having trouble seeing the print. A powerful, moving, but still very funny book.

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