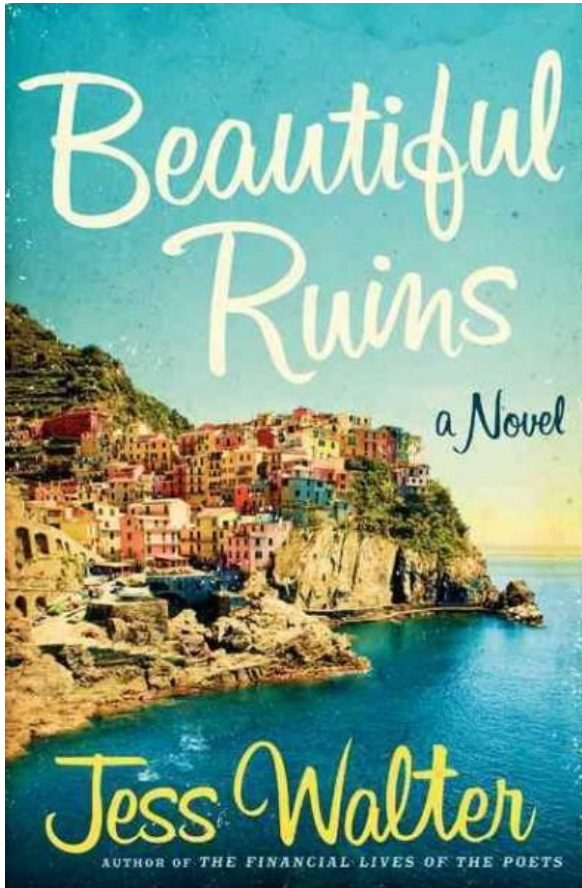


## About the book...



## About the author...



The 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 fifty 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.

Jess Walter is the author of five novels, including [The Zero](#), a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, and [Citizen Vince](#), winner of the 2005 Edgar Allan Poe Award for best novel. He has been a finalist for the *L.A. Times* Book Prize and the PEN USA Literary Prize in both fiction and nonfiction. His books have been *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and NPR best books of the year and have been translated into twenty languages. He lives in Spokane, Washington.

## Reviews

### *Booklist* /\*Starred Review\*/

In 1962, Pasquale Tursi, inheritor-proprietor of the Hotel Adequate View in Porto Vergogna, Italy, a tiny coastal village visited only by tourists who overshoot the similarly named neighbor they intended to go to, is shocked when beautiful, sickly American starlet Dee Moray arrives, on purpose. The reason for her presence, the botched cover-up of a minor disaster that occurred, in all places, on the set of the epically doomed *Cleopatra*, becomes but the first of the novel's many disasters. The story moves to present-day Hollywood, home to a shark producer and his young assistant who's hungry for the magic of cinema's golden era but too smart to quit the reality-show revenue. To say Walter succeeds in stitching past to present, continent to continent, undercuts the book entirely; he rather reimagines history in a package so appealing we'd be idiots not to buy it. At one point, from their perch on a tiny paddleboat, a drunken Richard Burton turns to Pasquale to note, This is one strange goddamn movie. Walter tragically exposes the recesses between the desires and intentions of his protagonists and how close the two might be if it weren't for the rest of the world. A novel shot in sparkly Technicolor.

### *Library Journal*/\*Starred Review\* /

Walter's newest book (after *The Financial Lives of the Poets*) will have readers checking out Richard Burton movies and Cinque Terre guidebooks after marveling at his imagination and spot-on characters. It's 1962, and Dee Moray, an American starlet, has just fled the tumultuous Roman set of *Cleopatra* to hole up in a dilapidated hotel in an obscure Italian seaside village. Pasquale Tursi, the young proprietor of the Hotel Adequate View, is instantly smitten. Flash-forward 50 years. Claire, the ambitious yet practical young assistant to the once-legendary producer Michael Deane, is enduring another Wild Pitch Friday. A screenwriter desperate to sell his script ("Donner! An epic story of resiliency!") and an older Italian man bearing Deane's tattered business card both appear at Claire's door. Walter expertly traces the lines among these characters, using keen wit and snappy dialog to express the theme that "life was a glorious catastrophe." VERDICT The pop-culture references and wistful tone will please Nick Hornby fans and build Walter's following. Not to be missed.

### *BookPage Reviews*

"An epic web of tangled lives"

Lost opportunities, found art, stories both true and false—these ideas bind the disparate threads of Jess Walter's new novel, *Beautiful Ruins*. Walter has always been a versatile writer. His 2005 novel, *Citizen Vince*, put an ex-criminal in witness protection in glamourless Spokane, Washington (where the author lives). *The Zero*, a 2006 National Book Award finalist, was a darkly inventive, almost surreal look at a cop's unraveling after 9/11. And in 2009 Walter satirized the recession-era struggle toward the American Dream in *The Financial Lives of the Poets*. So, even if we call this novel a romance, anyone who knows Walter knows it's more complicated than that.

For one thing, the book spans 50 years and two continents. It opens in 1962 in a small Italian fishing village. A tragically beautiful Hollywood actress arrives for a stay at the Hotel Adequate View, Pasquale Tursi's humble pensione. The actress has cancer; she's here to meet her lover, who will take her to a specialist in Switzerland. This, at any rate, is the story Tursi has been told. The actress' stay is brief but electrifying, utterly transforming his life.

Meanwhile, in modern-day Hollywood, a young producer's assistant despairs over the cynical deals her boss has been making. She's on the verge of quitting her job when a remarkable story wanders into her office. Also meanwhile, in Edinburgh, a 40-something musician risks one last effort at touring, blows it completely and calls his aging mother for rescue.

These stories and others soon reveal themselves to be one big story, a web of human weaknesses and noble sacrifice. Each character wears a facade that hides his or her true self; what drives the story is when and how those false fronts crumble. As ever, some of these folks are deeply sympathetic and some are exasperating. But, importantly, they (nearly) all learn and change and grow.

If Beautiful Ruins has a weak point, it's a slightly awkward section with the actor Richard Burton (ironic how a character who's a real person comes across as less real than the others). But generally, Walter's control of tone and the various voices is solid. The multiple storylines culminate in a last-chapter pastiche that distills the book's view that every story is a pitch—and it's up to readers whether to see that as depressing, hopeful or merely human nature.

#### *Kirkus Reviews* /\*Starred Review\*/

Hollywood operators and creative washouts collide across five decades and two continents in a brilliant, madcap meditation on fate. The sixth novel by Walter (*The Financial Lives of the Poets*, 2009, etc.) opens in April 1962 with the arrival of starlet Dee Moray in a flyspeck Italian resort town. Dee is supposed to be filming the Liz Taylor-Richard Burton costume epic *Cleopatra*, but her inconvenient pregnancy (by Burton) has prompted the studio to tuck her away. A smitten young man, Pasquale, runs the small hotel where she's hidden, and he's contemptuous of the studio lackey, Michael Deane, charged with keeping Dee out of sight. From there the story sprays out in multiple directions, shifting time and perspective to follow Deane's evolution into a Robert Evans-style mogul; Dee's hapless aging-punk son; an alcoholic World War II vet who settles into Pasquale's hotel to peck away at a novel; and a young screenwriter eagerly pitching a dour movie about the Donner Party. Much of the pleasure of the novel comes from watching Walter ingeniously zip back and forth to connect these loose strands, but it largely succeeds on the comic energy of its prose and the liveliness of its characters. A theme that bubbles under the story is the variety of ways real life energizes great art--Walter intersperses excerpts from his characters' plays, memoirs, film treatments and novels to show how their pasts inform their best work. Unlikely coincidences abound, but they feel less like plot contrivances than ways to serve a broader theme about how the unlikely, unplanned moments in our lives are the most meaningful ones. And simply put, Walter's prose is a joy--funny, brash, witty and rich with ironic twists. He's taken all of the tricks of the postmodern novel and scoured out the cynicism, making for a novel that's life-affirming but never saccharine. A superb romp.

Publisher Weekly /\*Starred Review\*/

Edgar Award - winning author Walter's well-constructed, bittersweet romance begins in April 1962, when a young innkeeper, Pasquale Tursi, puts up the "ethereal" American actress Dee Moray, who has arrived supposedly sick with stomach cancer at the remote Italian port of Vergogna. She has come from the extravagant Rome location of Cleopatra along with the philandering, tempestuous co-stars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton (Walter's title is taken from a description of Burton at 54). Pasquale soon discovers that 20th Century - Fox's chief troubleshooter, the young Michael Deane, has in fact whisked Dee, pregnant with the married Burton's child, away from the public eye to avoid scandal. Predictably, Pasquale falls in love with the beleaguered, vulnerable Dee, who is under pressure from Deane and the studio to get a discrete abortion in Switzerland. Fifty years later, the elderly Pasquale shows up on a Hollywood back lot looking for information about Dee's present whereabouts, much to the consternation of Deane, now a largely washed-up figure. The twisty narrative rolls on to show what actually became of Dee and her son, Pat Bender, a middle-aged, small-time performer. The Hollywood glitterati, led by the duplicitous Deane, come off looking thoroughly jaded and shallow compared to the stately, chivalrous Pasquale in Walter's (*Citizen Vince*) quirky and entertaining tale of greed, treachery, and love.

## Discussion questions

1. What does the title, *Beautiful Ruins*, refer to and how does it capture the essence of the novel?
2. At the beginning of the story, Pasquale Tursi is waiting "for life to come and find him." Is Dee Moray the "life" he was waiting for? Do you think most people wait for life—like a movie—to begin? Why?
3. When he first sees Dee, Pasquale thinks, "Life is a blatant act of imagination." Explain what he means. Do you agree with Pasquale?
4. Most of the novel's characters—Alvis Bender, Dee Moray, Shane Wheeler, Claire Silver, Pat Bender, even Richard Burton—have dreams. What are these dreams and how do they parallel and collide? How do their dreams play out in their lives? What would life be like if we didn't have dreams? What happens when they don't come true?
5. Americans pride themselves on the "American dream." What does this term mean to you? Do you think it is still attainable today? How much of our notions of the American Dream are shaped by Hollywood? Think about Shane Wheeler, the screenwriter, whose life's motto is Act as if ye have faith and it shall be given to you: "His was an outlook fed by years of episodic TV, by encouraging teachers and counselors, by science fair ribbons, participant medals, and soccer and basketball trophies—and, most of all, by two attentive and dutiful parents, who raise their five perfect children with the belief—hell, with the birthright—that as long as they had faith in themselves, they could be anything they wanted to be." Is faith enough—or hard work—to make our dreams come true? Can we truly be, achieve, or do anything we desire?
6. Claire Silver, the chief development assistant for legendary film producer Michael Deane, was enchanted by the magic of Hollywood when she saw *Breakfast at Tiffany's* two days before her tenth birthday. How do you think this movie shaped who she became? Was it for better or for worse? Is it the idea of fame that draws people to Hollywood, or something else? Is Hollywood as influential on lives today as it was through much of the twentieth century?
7. How would you characterize Michael Deane? One reviewer commented that he "has finer hidden instincts than the ones he has allowed to shape his life." When we meet him, Michael Deane seems like a parody of a Hollywood producer. What are the driving forces that propel his actions and how do they confound our expectations?
8. At the center of the novel, though largely offstage, is the legendary Hollywood production of *Cleopatra*. How is the movie symbolic of the novel's themes? How does Hollywood both fuel fantasies and destroy dreams? How is this demonstrated in the experiences of the novel's characters?

9. In Hollywood, everything happens because of the pitch. Have we become a nation of individuals pitching to each other? How would you pitch your life story to someone? How would you pitch *Beautiful Ruins*?
10. In the present day, the elderly Pasquale shares the story of his first meeting with Dee, describing it as "the moment that lasts forever." Why is this so for Pasquale? How does this revelation influence Shane and Claire? Have you ever had a moment like this?
11. How do dreams—like love—inspire us and hurt us? Do you agree with Michael's adage: we want what we want? Do you think this changes with age and maturity?
12. Years later, Alvin tells Dee, "All we have is the story we tell. Everything we do, every decision we make, our strength, weakness, motivation, history and character—what we believe—none of it is real; it's all part of the story we tell. But here's the thing: It's our goddamned story!" What about life—your own or someone you know—is real? How much do we control in our lives? What happens when we let other people tell our story for us?
13. How would you describe *Beautiful Ruins*?

## Readalikes

### [\*Laura Lamont's Life in Pictures\*](#) by Emma Straub (2012)

When the beautiful Elsa Emerson was growing up in Wisconsin in the 1920s, she loved to appear on stage in the small theater her family owned. But when tragedy struck her close-knit family, she turned and ran—straight to Hollywood with the boyfriend who would become her first husband. There, she is discovered by Irving Green, a well-known producer, and rechristened Laura Lamont. Soon, Laura begins starring in films, skyrocketing to stardom, and winning an Academy Award. She also marries Irving. But even though she has everything she ever dreamed of, Laura remains haunted by the life she left behind in Wisconsin. Before long, the fame and fortune start to wear on her, and she struggles to care for her children and maintain her career. This novel follows the rise and fall of Laura's stardom throughout her life.

### [\*My Week with Marilyn\*](#) by Colin Clark (2011)

This memoir by Colin Clark is taken directly from his diaries during the brief time he worked as an assistant on *The Prince and the Showgirl* with Sir Laurence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe. It was 1956, and Clark was in his early 20s. Marilyn had just married Arthur Miller, and was already struggling with addiction and the increased pressures of fame—issues that caused many problems on set and led to frequent conflicts between Marilyn and Olivier. As a result, Marilyn and Clark developed a close, yet innocent friendship, and even spent a week traveling together in England. The diaries chronicle that week, and the time Clark spent working with Monroe and getting to know her. After they returned, life became more difficult for Clark as he struggled with his feelings for Monroe. This memoir became a feature film of the same name, which was released in 2011.

[Acts of Love](#) by Judith Michael (1997)

This romance finds a young man searching for the protege of his deceased grandmother, a famous stage actress. It seems that he has found a box of letters containing correspondence between the two women, and he becomes infatuated by the mysterious younger actress. He searches for her but soon realizes that this type of courtship is not always easy.

*White Vespa* by Kevin Oderman (2012)

In this novel by Kevin Oderman, photographer Myles Twomey, who had visited Greece's Dodecanese Islands in the summer of 1995, returns to the islands a year later to complete an assignment. Myles's life has changed dramatically since his previous visit. His son has gone missing, and he and his wife have divorced. In Greece Myles finds distraction from his troubles and begins to make connections with the people he meets: Jim, a college professor, and Anne, a bartender. But as Myles finds himself falling for Anne, he learns that her personal life is complicated. Anne's older playboy brother, Paul, has come to the island and brought tension with him. Apparently Anne is not pleased that Paul is their parents' sole heir.



Ann Arbor District Library