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Murder served up hot from ancient Rome to modern Japan.

Reviewed by Dennis Drabelle

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THE WATER THIEF

By Ben Pastor Thomas Dunne. 350 pp. \$24.95

Ben Pastor's *The Water Thief* is one of those books that undermine the categories of fiction. It has all the earmarks of a mystery: a disputed death in the past, present-day murders (the book's "present," that is: the 4th century), an investigating hero and a surprise villain. But Pastor has taken such pains to conjure up Italy and Egypt back then, to take the temperature of the Roman Empire, to depict local officials coping with the challenges posed by the spread of Christianity, that the result is far richer than the traditional whodunit.

It might make more sense to think of *The Water Thief* as a riff on a classic of world literature, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. For Pastor's puzzle is also a pivotal incident for Yourcenar: the death of the Emperor Hadrian's male lover, the beautiful Antinous. According to the historians, he drowned in the Nile in the 2nd century. In Yourcenar's retelling, he committed suicide because he couldn't bear the thought of aging -- and likely losing pride of place to a younger favorite. In Pastor's version, Antinous may have been murdered; to discover how and why is the mission on which Aelius Spartianus, an ex-military man, has been sent by the current emperor, Diocletian, who is eager to clear up the mystery involving his predecessor.

Some passages in *The Water Thief* are lovely.

(“Soon, pouring out from under trees, tombs, and isolated farms like a liquid, shadows began to lengthen.”) Others are clumsy. But throughout the novel, Pastor, like Robert Harris in last year’s *Imperium*, persuasively evokes an ancient world that is both strange and strikingly like our own, and the plot works shrewd variations on the known facts.