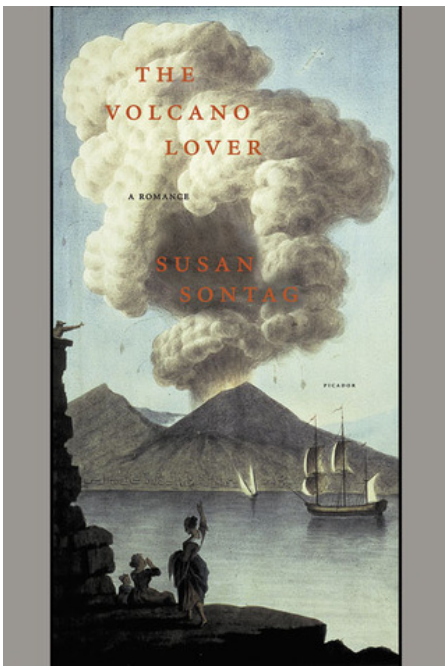

The Volcano Lover: A Romance

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Set in 18th century Naples, based on the lives of Sir William Hamilton, his celebrated wife Emma, and Lord Nelson, and peopled with many of the great figures of the day, this unconventional, bestselling historical romance from the National Book Award-winning author of *In America* touches on themes of sex and revolution, the fate of nature, art and the collector's obsessions, and, above all, love.

The Volcano Lover: A Romance Details

Date	:	Published August 1st 2004 by Picador (first published January 1st 1992)
ISBN	:	
Author	:	Susan Sontag
Format	:	Paperback 432 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Italy, Novels, Literature, Literary Fiction

From Reader Review The Volcano Lover: A Romance for online ebook

Lisa Fluet says

I read this book while in Naples (it's set in Naples, late-18th-early 19th century). I think it's probably Susan Sontag's best novel. But then I don't really like her novels normally...[random trivia]--Susan Sontag's novels come up in the movie "Bull Durham" (Kevin Costner--or "Crash"--doesn't like them, either...)

Antonmyles says

This is an exhilarating read more for its encyclopedic if kaleidoscopically shifting views of a passionately intelligent and acquisitive Cavaliere. It matters little that the novel is based on the real-life triangle of Sir William Hamilton, his wife Emma, and Lord Nelson. What counts is the formal yet lyrical beauty of the writing, the ever-changing impressions of a man in love with not just a woman but the world of objects and art. Almost mystical in the revelry of its cataloguing of things and experience, it is at once a contradictory celebration of the primacy of empiricism and the transcendence from the mundane that only an elevated mind can realize in the accumulation of life. This is one book that epitomizes the philosophy of gestalt aesthetics: that a thing of beauty is greater than the sum of all its parts.

Blueskies18 says

I couldn't even finish this book. Not my cup of tea. If I don't like the style and what the author has to say, I don't waste my time on it.

Susan says

Deep research on scandals and art works of aristocratic late 18th-century Naples around the time of the French Revolution made into good story/character study of English aesthete and collector William Hamilton, his two wives, and Admiral Nelson. Hamilton profited from the excavations at Pompeii, had an intimate view of the scatalogical excesses and executions perpetrated by the Neapolitan court, and participated in a few menages a trois. His second wife Emma progresses as a Barry Lyndon-type rake, and Admiral Nelson is revealed as a fool. With first-person narratives of the death of each major character in the final chapters, Sontag tears away masks, depriving collecting and the desire for social betterment of moral value. Sontag's constant need to provide a 20th-century perspective weighs down the novel with her own narcissistic reflections. After all, she herself was a collector of facts and perceptions as much as an actor in the intellectual drama of the second half of the 20th-century.

Wordsmith says

I love this book, having first read it back in '92-'93. It's still sitting right there on my shelf, despite having been pulled off several times for a re-read. Complex? Uhmmm, not really. Big words? No bigger, certainly, than McCarthy. Ha! Not even close. No, just top of the line, grade A, "historical romance." If that. I'd call it much more myself. Susan Sontag is a writers writer. 5 Star caliber all the way.

Fiona says

The dramatic heart of this book lies in Nelson’s distinctly unheroic behaviour during the Neapolitan Republican uprising in 1799, when he oversaw the execution of hundreds of ‘rebels’, and hanged the much-loved Admiral Caracciolo and threw his body into the harbour.
The story starts, though, as Sir William Hamilton goes back to Naples from London to carry on his work as British Ambassador. His wife - the reserved, refined Catherine - plays the piano in the Neapolitan palazzo while Hamilton is out shooting wild boar with the bloodthirsty king, climbing his beloved Vesuvius, or adding to his vast collection of rocks, minerals, vases and paintings. When Catherine dies, Hamilton is seduced by his nephew’s young mistress, Emma Hamilton. Emma is exuberant, beautiful and vulgar, the opposite of Catherine. And we all know what happens when Emma meets Nelson.
Many phrases stick in the mind. ‘To travel is to shop. To travel is to loot.’ ‘The first principle of the science of felicity is not to succumb to indignation or self-pity.’
This is a fascinating and beautiful book, where Sontag contemplates the strange mind of the collector, the power of beauty, and how success can go to a person’s head.

Alex Ankarr says

It's a long time since I read it and hard to remember details. Barring Emma's mum's disgusted aside of "Men are bad!", which is hard to argue. Also clear is the memory of how loving and devoted the mother/daughter relationship is - a filial ideal, a beautiful sororal dream that I can't believe in any more. It's not like that really with women, kids, it don't really exist! It's Middleton that got it right: 'Women Beware Women'. And how.

Tom Lee says

Who knew a volcano could give birth to such a wealth of conflicting symbolism? In Sontag’s gripping piece of historical fiction, it appears as a metaphor for destruction and preservation, the artistic and the scientific, the penis and the vagina – and a whole lot more.

I personally love historical fiction and The Volcano Lover is an enjoyable and thought-provoking example of the genre. It takes as its basis a very famous, real-life love affair from the Napoleonic Wars, but avoids directly naming its key characters until the very last page. The protagonist is not only a volcanologist, but also a collector of assorted objets d’art and British ambassador in 18th-century Italy. His residence in Naples overlooks the smoldering Mount Vesuvius, which he regularly clambers up either to collect samples or to entertain visiting dignitaries – one of the most famous of whom (and certainly the most amusingly acerbic) is

Goethe.

This visit by Goethe, like the general framework of the novel, is largely faithful to history and certain events that took place in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies leading up to and during the Napoleonic Wars. There are also, however, several occurrences described that never really took place, blurring the lines between fact and fiction – for instance, the plot from the opera Tosca is insouciantly inserted into the very real persecution of anti-monarchists.

Sontag clearly doesn't want the reader to dwell too much on the historical elements, but more on the universal themes. The Volcano Lover employs several narrative devices to force us back from becoming completely enveloped by the world it evokes, e.g. not naming its central couple until the end, starting the book with a scene set more than 200 years after the events described, having dead characters reflect on their lives. This is a novel that entertains, but also very obviously wants you to think what the plot and characters say about war, women and the nature of art.

Luke says

In this novel, Sontag's insights are deft, her prose luxurious, and her characters vivid. While I might have preferred a faster pace at certain points, I enjoyed the book because of how easy it was to feel transported. Great escapist literature, and an interesting story.

David says

The book is so close to great. . . I was reading Sontag's Paris Review interview afterward, which is fascinating, obviously--at 13, she was apparently reading the journals of Gide--and I think it opened me up to the flaw in the book, which is structural. She had in mind this balletic structure modeled on the four temperaments--melancholic, sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, although the last two are more like epilogues. First, Sontag gives us an oddly sad story about this quiet aristocrat living in Naples (melancholic) and then the action of the book, his whirlwind romance with a younger woman and the revolt in Naples and the British hero who saves the royal court(sanguine). While these parts aren't necessarily at odds, and both are honestly excellent, I'm not sure that they compliment each other.

Let me put it another way. A review below says that the emotional heart of the story is Nelson's actions during the Revolution. But Nelson's not even present for most of this book, and the Revolution is eventually only a minor point in a much longer narrative. Or you could say that the focus is really the title character, but he's got little to do with the Revolution, and Sontag does become noticeably less interested in him when Nelson enters the picture. At the same time, the lens isn't quite wide enough to give us a satisfying picture of life in Naples at the end of the 18th Century, or even of court life there. The Volcano Lover is about more than the Cavalier, but not quite about enough more to be satisfying. To quote the cliche, the whole is a little less than the sum of the parts.

But those parts! I'll defend this thing from almost all of its detractors. A common criticism is that Sontag doesn't have sympathy for any of her characters, which is bullshit. I respect the Cavalier, who is truly a gentle human being and a lover of knowledge, a rare and estimable quality. (Compare him to his nephew

Charles, a character that Sontag really doesn’t respect.) Then there’s the Cavalier’s wives, both of whom we are asked to sympathize with, the second wife throughout and the first wife only at the novel’s end (a result of the novel’s opening focusing narrowly on the Cavalier). Even the Hero is seen as something of the ultimate romantic lover, putting his career at risk, continually, for this obese former prostitute.

As for the narrative intrusions by Sontag, they’re not all that common, especially after the book’s first hundred pages or so, and they’re usually fascinating. Who could refuse a two-page digression on the nineteen year-old who shattered the Cavalier’s greatest treasure, the Portland Vase, in 1851, and what says about male desire and great art? Consider too that it contains paragraphs like this: “Torch a temple. Pulverize a vase. Slash a Venus. Smash a perfect ephebe’s toes.”

The Volcano Lover has period pomp, gorgeous prose, a satirical edge, perhaps the most violent mob scene I’ve ever read and an under-recognized warmth. I can imagine literally everyone I know reading this thing and enjoying it. Which isn’t to say that they would. As the Cavalier would say, other individuals so often disappoint.

Emir says

Okurken az daha s?k?nt?dan ölecektim.

El says

The dramatic love triangle between Sir William Hamilton, his wife Emma, and her lover, Lord Nelson, of the late 18th-century Naples is the basis of Sontag's historical "romance". The Cavaliere is an obsessive collector and fascinated with Mount Vesuvius which becomes symbolic of each characters' emotions at one point or another. When his beloved Catherine dies he falls in love with his nephew's lover, Emma, who ultimately finds true love not in the Cavaliere, but in "the hero", Lord Nelson. The volcano demonstrates the malcontent of the characters in their endless search for satisfaction.

I have not read any other fiction by Sontag, but found the writing style she implemented in this book different than what I had expected after the one or two essays I have read by her. The lack of quotation marks in dialogue is something I am not particularly a fan of (if James Joyce couldn't win me over, I'm not likely to lap it up by someone else), but I managed to make it through. The connection between the volcano and the characters and the mirror images of nature and society was fascinating to me and managed to keep me enthralled.

In typical fashion I wound up being more interested in the shadowy sideline characters, such as the fortune teller, Efrosina. While I wanted to know more about her, her time in the story was short. Character development left something to be desired; while I can understand why Joyce made some of the ridiculous choices he had made (whether I agree with them or not), I can appreciate his efforts. Sontag's choices left me questioning more than I would have liked. Maybe I just need to read more of her fiction to get a better grasp on her work.

Johan Thilander says

Det känns som att Susan hände mig. Tidigare har jag bara läst hennes *On Photography*, och hennes essäistiska bakgrund är tydlig här.
Denna bok är väldigt, väldigt bra. Väldigt bra, alltså.

Eve Kay says

I did alot of yawning while reading this, it was honestly very boring. I also did alot of that sound that I would imagine myself making if there was a hairball forming at the back of my throat. All these rich people problems, swimming in luxury and opulence and all these immaterial things surrounding them, the need to collect, to have, to own. Yak. Art is talked as if it's only something appreciated by the wealthy and some of the art pieces mentioned went right over my head so I have no understanding what is being said. Clearly a book for the "better folk".

Patty says

This was a hard book to get into. The challenge was gettin through the superficial lives of it's 3 main characters. It is discribed as an historical novel, but I thought the author spent way too much time with their internal struggles which were very common and disgustingly predictable. I also question whether this was a true romance novel.

When the "action" picked up which is to say when somthing actually happens the possibility for a good situaltion to learn something about this period in History; the late 1700's, the French Revolution and the Neapolitan Republic, Napolean and Lord Nelson, even the art of collecting and selling antiquities there just isn't enough. I guess I just wanted more than just an emotional carnival ride.

I'd like to know more about Revolution in general after this read, since Sontag does give some wonderful insites into why and how change progresses. How the mob mentality works and how even those with the best intentions are somtimes thwarted. Perhaps Sontag should have used the essay form to get her points across.

I couldn't recommend the book to anyone but I'm glad I was able to persevere.

Suzanne Stroh says

Annie Liebovitz has called this Susan Sontag's best book, and she should know, and I agree. It's a gorgeous, lyrical novel of ideas disguised as an 18th century romance about a love triangle between the British ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples, the concubine he marries and the Naval hero she worships. This book has it all: pretty girls, virile noblemen, erupting volcanoes, priceless paintings, science and seduction, sex and war crimes, houses and gardens, gallows and guillotines.

As with everything I've ever read by the great-lesbian-intellectual-who-came-before-me, I started out hating the book for being too clever by half. As with most of Sontag's books, I felt I could barely get through it the

first time.

But nobody is ever compelled to re-read a book (twice!) if disdain is the deepest emotion. What ran deeper than my disdain for Sontag's European grammatical constructions? My admiration for her powerful intellect. I even came to like things about the book I loathed on first reading. What's the opposite of a *coup de foudre*,? What do you call it when it leads to love?

It is perhaps for this reason--the full range of my mixed emotions--that I give the book three stars, in much the same way as I give Joan Schenkar's *Dolly Wilde* only three stars and Sybille Bedford's novel *A Legacy* merely four. And I have mixed emotions about *that*. Guilty feelings. But mixed emotions cost you stars, as Mercedes de Acosta well knew.

So much for stars. Now back to the book.

In form, *The Volcano Lover* stands the *roman galant* on its head while setting the stage, historically and literarily, for the flowering of gay culture that led generations of queers to establish colonies in southern Italy. (Another rock star, gay travel writer William Beckford, who went on the first Grand Tour, makes a cameo appearance as a houseguest in *The Volcano Lover*. I only realized on the second reading that in dining with Beckford I was dining with Sontag.) Over time I slowly became aware of how sexy it feels to be in the hands of an author in full command of her literary, cultural, linguistic and historical material.

In function, the book subverts the contemporary art world, satirizing its denizens--collectors in particular--better than *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. In prose, it impresses you with its humanity. Here is a world-weary author, you can't help but notice, with true understanding of the affectations and vanities in every character you hate to love. The final scenes read as testimonials that have left a deep imprint.

An in its poetry, this book makes you weep. The tenderest scenes are that affecting.

Sontag came a generation before me. They say you never get along with your mother. But if you fail to learn her lessons, that's your problem. And my life of books would not be the same if I hadn't tried one more time--and learned at last--to appreciate seeing the world through the eyes of Susan Sontag.

This book lives inside me now. It haunts me. My own characters agree. It haunts them, too. That is why *The Volcano Lover* makes a cameo appearance in Book Three of my own novel cycle, *Tabou*, very much in homage to the literary contributions of Susan Sontag, that butch intellectual boulevardier who never asked me out.

Matt says

This rating will no doubt seem harsh, compared to the rating I just gave another book, but I think at least in some ways, it's merited.

I really like Sontag's essays, and think she's quite a wonderful writer and thinker, and a lot of that is on display here. I was curious to see what she'd make out of a novel, and she doesn't disappoint in that regard--this really is a strange book, one that is as interested in argument and philosophy and culture as much as it is in more traditional novelistic concerns. It announces itself as a strange book, one that does very little in the way of traditional narrative scene setting, and instead, for most of the book, is happy to skim the surface of

the action and resort mostly to comment.

It's chilly and strange and for the first half of the book, I think it works in this idiosyncratic, deliberate way. I like the Cavaliere as a character, I am a bit of a collector myself, and I'm pretty interested in what Sontag has to say about collecting, late capitalism, and all the rest.

But I can't help but feel she loses the script around the time the Cavaliere's second wife enters into a romantic triangle with Nelson. It just wrenches the story out of areas I'm interested into events that seem to have no thematic significance, that don't illuminate much beyond themselves. And then it drags on and on, without any discernible point-- I mean, there are glances at totalitarianism and repression and democracy, all of which are in Sontag's wheelhouse, but what she has to say here feels too provisional, too rooted in the particular circumstances of her historical romance.

I do like the monologue that closes the book, which is obviously a very contemporary cri de couer about arts in the present moment. But it comes probably a hundred pages after Sontag lost my full sympathy.

Julia says

Perhaps I should start with a comment by Evelyn Toynton in COMMENTARY, Nov. 1992, right after the book was published. This is just a short section of a well written critique:

"But in the end, apart from some vivid images of street scenes in Naples, of a rampaging mob, of Sir William’s pathetic pet monkey, and of Emma dancing, the strongest impression one takes away from this book is of the suffocatingly humorless presence of Susan Son-tag.

She has become by now a virtual icon of Mind, the ultimate “glamorous intellectual,” as Vanity Fair puts it. Yet her chief strength may lie in nothing much more than the ability to assume a voice of authority at all times. In the case of The Volcano Lover, what this produces is a solemn rather than a serious novel, in which portentous observations are made in the tone of someone offering a glimpse of the Holy Grail."

It is that cold, distant, "voice of authority" narrator that made this a very hard book for me to read. Strangely, that voice works best when describing the volcano itself--but the people in the book remain puppets and Sontag comes right out, at the very end of the book, and states how she despises them. In the last 4 pages of the book, the "voice" is that of Eleonora Pimentel as she is about to be hanged for her part in the Neapolitan revolution of 1799. Those 4 pages are simply amazing. Eleonora ends the book by saying:

"But I cannot forgive those who did not care about more than their own glory or well-being. They thought they were civilized. They were despicable. Damn them all."

So perhaps Sontag deliberately set up William and Emma Hamilton and Lord Nelson to be self-indulgent puppets--but I have little patience with authors who detest their own characters. If Sontag had written a diatribe against wealth and aristocats, she should have used her famous essay form. And if she IS an advocate for the poor, why write this novel without bringing them into the picture at all?

I have to admit I skimmed this book rapidly--but those last 4 pages stopped me in my tracks. Those pages brought the book from one star to two for me.

Matt says

I love Sontag the writer, provocateur, thinker, etc...and I love her essays and criticism. And her life. I always think twice about what she says and recommends and the attitudes she takes.

But this book didn't really live up to my expectations. I love some of it- the aphoristic insights and the subdued delineations of places and objects, especially. Her characterization can be pretty strong and sometimes the evocative feel of time and place is really there.

Unfortunately the writing is a little too self-conscious, a little too jagged and angular. There's this rather irritating tic she seems to have where her sentences. have to be like five or six words long. and end abruptly. It's almost as if she's willfully capping herself off once the idea or sensation is just starting to breathe. I think it stems from the ever-present ultra-intellectual quality of her writing and (at least, it seems to me) her general being. I understand this kind of thing, intimately, because when I try to write creatively I often start hacking up my sentences or spiking the rhythm because it seems too...derivative? Felicitous? Easy? "Stream of consciousness-y"? Simple? Cliched?

So I sympathize but for extended reading it's a little bludgeoning. One can feel (or at least I could) the massive intelligence and critical rigor of the mind that wrote this, but that same brain sort of weighs the whole thing down too often, nearly reaching the point, on many occasions, of being pedantic or turgid. I hate to say it because I have such deep respect for her but I can't ignore it.

Towards the end she starts to pick up speed- the free indirect discourse passing through the different characters starts to really pack an emotional and sensory punch. This happened throughout the novel when she cut loose a little bit and started to let the language do the talking (!). At times, things hum along pretty smoothly but there's always this leaden density (huge paragraphs, esoteric slightly interesting references, over-written psychological descriptions, chopped melody) just around the corner. I started to lose interest and do that page-flipping thing one does when a book starts to lose its pull.

It's not a bad book, it's just not a great one. Two stars is the perfect score. It's ok.

I'll read her other fiction, certainly, and I'll definitely dig in to more of her essays and nonfiction, etc. But as for now I'll hold off on the former and look forward to the latter.....

Nicholas says

Historical fiction seems like a terribly difficult genre to write in. Make one mistake and you've written a history. Lean too far in the other direction and you end up with a Mills & Boon. Maintain anything less than a tight focus and you end up with something that is alternately disinterested history, feminist critique, and, yes, romance, but which fails to come together satisfyingly.

Not that The Volcano Lover isn't an interesting book. Sontag manages to turn a set of fairly unlikeable

characters and a story that plays out on the sidelines of a great historical event (rather than being one itself) into something compelling and, occasionally, thought-provoking.

The novel describes the life of Sir William Hamilton ("The Cavaliere"), Emma Hamilton, and Lord Nelson ("The Hero"), when Sir William was stationed in Naples as the English ambassador. It follows their lives through the romance between Emma Hamilton and Lord Nelson, their flight from Naples, and Emma's ultimate abandonment and death.

The novel is divided into two sections. The first part, occupying a good hundred pages or so, introduces us to the Cavaliere and his passions: volcanology and collecting. This part contains some stunning historical writing, but lacks the sarcastic authorial intrusions that undermine, and then rescue, the book as a whole. The Cavaliere is, simply, a bland person. Although Sontag is at pains to describe his "passions", she cannot do much with the material she has to work with, and the Cavaliere is not a passionate man. He is described as a dilettante twice, first by Goethe ("What a simple-minded epicurean this Englishman was. [...:] A mere dilettante, he would have called him, had dilettante not then been a term of praise.") and then at the end of the novel by Eleonora Pimentel ("Who was the esteemed Sir William Hamilton but an upper-class dilettante enjoying the many opportunities afforded in a poor and corupt and interesting country to pilfer the art and make a living out of it and to get himself known as a connoisseur.") With these statements Sontag seems to self-consciously acknowledge the difficulty of weaving a story around a character who begins passively and becomes only more passive as his life progresses.

The second part of the novel describes the story involving the Cavaliere, his new wife Emma Hamilton, and the Hero (Lord Nelson) -- the famous love triangle, and their joint involvement in the retaliation against key figures in the French revolution. This portion should have been a more interesting study. Emma Hamilton is undoubtedly an interesting character, far more full of life than the Cavaliere, and with an actual story arc. Unfortunately the novel doesn't really do her justice. Her transition from romantic idealist to broken mercenary is jumpy, and mostly told through indifferent eyes. When she finally dies ignominiously, in dire poverty, it is hard to empathise with her, or, in fact, to feel anything at all.

A major theme in this novel is the role of women. This is quite understandable given the author, but it comes up unexpectedly in the story. For women in this novel, for example, sex is only positive as far as it benefits them--and sex can only benefit women by pleasing the men whose approval they seek. For the Queen of Naples it is a way to keep the eternally-childish king content so that she may run the court without interference. For Emma Hamilton's mother it is the way through which Emma will ensure their livelihood in Naples. Sontag can't resist some direct authorial commentary on this issue, and it is always jarring. For example, the blame for much of the scandalous behaviour of the trio after the Revolution is attributed to Emma Hamilton: "Letting the woman, or women, in the story take the rap is a resourceful way of occluding the full coherence as politics of what was decreed from the hero's flagship. (This is often part of misogyny's usefulness.)" The is a powerful sentence, and would be fantastic if the story were, say, an essay on attitudes towards women in the 18th century, but instead it's delivered as an addendum, not more than a couple of pages long, following a graphic description of the hangings of various nobles--a graphic description which does not include Emma Hamilton in any way at all--not even in a positive light. If you're going to make a point about sexism in the 18th century, why not tie it into the story?

The best parts of the story, though, are Sontag's acerbic, narrative-breaking interjections. These are delicious and historically well-informed. On the role of women in the new French republic: "The new model of rule, which revoked whatever legitimate claim women had to governance, was the assembly--composed only of men, since it derived its legitimacy from a hypothetical contract among equals. Women, defined as neither fully rational nor free, could not be a party to this contract". On Galatea and golems: "Rarely does a female

statue come to life in order to take revenge. But when the statue is a man, his purpose is almost always to do or to avenge a wrong. " On irony: "Irony is the staple response of the English gentleman expatriate to the weirdness, the uncouthness of the locals among whom he finds himself obliged (even if it be by his own choice) to live. Being ironical is a way of showing one's superiority without actually being so ill-bred as to be indignant."

Back in Naples, Sontag remains slavishly historically accurate, and this dedication affects the story in curious ways. Aware that she has no macroscopic control over her character's actions, she doesn't seem to attempt to understand them properly in order to explain what they do. As a result, the characters sometimes feel like puppets, doing things without any real justification. The characters in the book aren't named, but are instead referred to as The Cavaliere, The Cavaliere's Wife, The Hero -- Sontag seems to take her own self-consciousness at working with stereotypes, rather than fully-fledged human beings, and manages to make the reader feel self-conscious, too.

Susan Sontag once declared that "the white race is the cancer of human history". Only much later did she offer a partial apology -- to cancer victims. This is not the book I expected from someone capable of making such a statement, especially in a novel about forbidden romance, revolution, and volcanoes. I expected less caution, and more fire.
