



Justa

Susanna Deiss

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HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW: The backdrop of Joseph Jay Deiss and Susanna Deiss' delightful historical novel *Justa* may be familiar to most readers: the city of Herculaneum, doomed to be buried under molten lava at the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79. Excavations are ongoing in a small fraction of what was once a sprawling, bustling city, and like similar works at Pompeii, those excavations have yielded tantalizing clues about the lives of the ordinary people who were trapped and killed there two thousand years ago. One such story involves a young woman named Justa whose mother was a freed slave of some wealth, which she bequeathed to her daughter. The widow of the man who freed Justa's mother has designs on that inheritance, and the novel takes readers on a fascinating re-creation of the provincial Roman legal system as Justa strives to protect her legacy in court. She comes to the attention of idealistic young nobleman Marcus Balbus, which adds social conflict to legal woes, and Deiss & Deiss manage it all very skillfully, balancing and counterbalancing plots and subplots while keeping one eye firmly fixed on the apocalypse the reader knows is coming. *Justa* is an appealingly designed and profusely illustrated book, but its main attractions are the decidedly old-fashioned kind: solid plot, attractive young lovers, a hissable villain, and an inevitable fate that just might be survivable. Highly recommended. About reviewer Steve Donoghue: In addition to writing reviews for the Historical Novel Society, Steve Donoghue is Managing Editor of the literary journal "Open Letters Monthly," and he writes for the "National", the "Washington Post," the "Wall Street Journal," "Kirkus," and the "Boston Globe."

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