

Research Article

Forum

Novellas and Free Voluntary Reading: an overview and some starting points for further research into practice

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Abstract

In the US the use of extensive reading in Latin for school students to develop vocabulary growth and attain reading fluency is an emerging classroom practice. To meet the demand for resources, a small but growing number of teachers have started to make available self-published short Latin stories or ‘novellas’, designed to provide students with extensive reading material in Latin at an age-appropriate level for novice and intermediate level students. There are now over 100 such short books, written in Latin, on a variety of topics, suitable for beginner and intermediate students (typically of between one and two years taught Latin). This article contains three areas of interest: the rationale, challenges and successes of writing and using these resources in the school classroom; a snapshot survey of a range of publications, to give readers a ‘flavour’ of the materials; and some further reading.

Key words: Latin, free voluntary reading, extensive reading, pedagogy

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Novellas and extensive reading

Teachers have been exploiting digital media to support the growth of (mostly) freestanding short stories, written in Latin, for classroom use – now commonly referred to as novellas. Self-publication and sales through organisations such as Amazon Publishing and self-promotion through social media feeds, websites and blogs make their production and advertisement very easy. This challenge to the traditional control over the curriculum by commercial publishers, and to typically traditional, grammar-led publications to suit it, have contributed to discussions about the purpose and uses of novellas as an alternative to commercially-available materials. For example, the Facebook group *Teaching Latin for Acquisition* (2022) recently posted a lengthy thread of 152 comments on the subject of self-published Latin novellas, covering such topics as correct usage of Latin (or ‘Latinity’), the correction of errors in the Latin written by authors (and how to correct them politely) and the usage of novellas in more general terms². Most Latin novellas are therefore being written by teachers themselves for the needs of beginners and to fill a gap for such material.

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Traditional approaches to reading a Latin text often involve only intensive reading, that is, paying close attention to vocabulary, grammar and the commentary. Olimpi suggests such approaches ‘treat Latin as an object of study not a vehicle for communication’ (Olimpi, 2019, 84). I liken the approach taken by many story-based commercially-published Latin course books to that of a treadmill: the direction of the language learning journey appears ever-forward; there’s little respite - less anywhere to get off and rest a while. Of course, one might argue that without some form of systematic progression in the lexical, grammatical and syntactical sophistication of the course book, how would a learner in the classroom ‘grow’? But from a pedagogical point of view, even these course books seem to share with the more traditional grammar-focused course books a propensity not to let students take a breather or (dare I say) go backwards – two aspects of language learning that research suggests tend to happen naturally and might even be good for learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2017). I am aware that many of the stories in the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 2007) and *Suburani* (Hands-Up Education, 2020) do vary in pace and complexity. For example, often the first story or part of the story in a new chapter is relatively easy and is designed to ease learners into the new language material. Thus, they follow the good practice of building on given material before elaborating into new material. Learning a language (even Latin) is not as linear a process as first observations of a course book might lead us to believe.

Moreover, the treatment of a text as a language artefact which must be dissected (a common practice among Latin teachers, I have noted from observations of some 15 years) slows the development of reading fluency. On the other hand, it has long been realised from researchers in second language development that readers learn to read better by reading rather than by being given

instructions on how to read (William, 1986). Grabe (2009) reports that extensive reading practice automatises second language learners' lower-level reading processes, thereby aiding reading fluency. The benefit of reading fluency is that it improves the comprehension of a text (Nation, 2007). This is probably rather obvious, but needs restating: students get better at reading by reading rather than by being told how to read. The availability of the right sort of reading material is therefore vital.

Development of reading fluency

In order to develop reading fluency, research suggests that there should be fewer rather than larger numbers of individual items of vocabulary, and for the story context itself to carry along the more complex grammar, without holding back (Nation, 2007). Batstone and Ellis (2009) argue from evidence from second language pedagogy research that for beginning language students a 'meaning-first – grammar-after' model is more effective than the opposite. One is reminded of the original design of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 2007) and the use its authors made of a so-called 'passenger grammar', whereby students' previous exposure to and familiarity with a given story's lexis and syntax was supposed to help them to be able to infer novel lexis and syntax well before explicit explanation was made: the rationale was that a student did not need explicit knowledge of all possible grammatical forms or syntactical features in order to comprehend the story if the story was well-composed for learners' immediate needs (Wilkins, 1969; 1970). Detailed explanation of the grammar came afterwards.

Novellas, then, are designed to provide extensive reading material in the target language which is not dominated by grammatical forms presented in the traditional sequence: authors restrict (or 'shelter') vocabulary so that the meaning of the text remains comprehensible and therefore interesting enough for the student to read extensively, without too much difficulty – indeed, even for pleasure. Krashen describes traditional grammar-first approaches to teaching modern languages as a 'serious error in language education... Only after hard and tedious work do we earn the right to actually enjoy the use of language' (Krashen, 2004, 3). Many commercially-available Latin courses today fall into this trap: they often overemphasise grammar knowledge at the expense of experience and use of language; and teachers follow the books' lead in their own classroom practices. The original point of the novella was that the story should be fully comprehensible for its intended audience at the point of language proficiency they had reached. They are not intended as instruction manuals for grammar; some teachers use them (incorrectly) for this purpose, either explicitly, by drawing attention to the grammar through asking students to translate, or implicitly, by making reference to the sort of syntactic features which the book introduces 'before the students have learnt it'. Following Krashen, therefore, a growing number of Latin teachers have begun to use novellas both as supplements to standard available commercial resources and sometimes as replacement materials in their own right (see, for example, Ash 2019 and Patrick 2019).

Authenticity

A lively debate exists among some Latin teachers about whether teachers should be using 'inauthentic' Latin texts, such as those written by 'moderns' at all. Such discussion in modern languages on the issue of the classroom use of 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' texts is not at all new and has become occasionally divisive (see, for

example, Day & Bamford 1998 and Simonsen 2019). It is possible to see the rationale – students ought to listen to and read modern foreign languages as they are spoken and written in authentic situations if they are to develop the requisite skills to communicate in them. And there is plenty of suitable material available that is age-appropriate and of contemporary as well as historical interest for use in the modern languages classroom. Simple texts and speech are readily available and completely authentic, in the sense of being used by real native users. For Latin, of course, the situation is very different. The traditional aim at examination level – for students to be able to comprehend and translate original Roman authors – dictates much of what students do in the classroom. Many students are subjected to a crash-course in basic Latin grammar and frogmarched by their teachers through Latin texts which are considerably in advance of their capabilities. But novellas can fill that gap. Instead of worrying about whether the text is authentic, the teachers should provide students with an 'authentic reading experience' (Widdowson, 1990) and they should use – or write, if necessary – a text that is suitable for their students at the particular stage in their learning.

Other teachers worry that, in the process of writing simple Latin, authors of novellas sacrifice the idiomatic nature of the authentic language itself and can undermine the students' mental representation of the language (see, for example contributors to the Facebook group *Teaching Latin for Acquisition* [2022]). But as Teresa Ramsby, Professor of Latin at Amhurst UMASS, points out in the same Facebook thread, it's the role of *teachers* to explain the rules of Latin to students, while the purpose of the texts is to give the students the experience and context for Latin. Referring to Emma Vaderpool's self-published novella *Kandake Amanirenas: regina Nubiae*, Ramsby notes:

Students will see patterns in Latin *when they read it* [my Italics] early and often, sure, but I sincerely doubt that a student's grammatical monitor is going to expect that the sight of 'APUD + Ablative' (for example) in a novella means (forever!) that *apud* takes the ablative. No – the student is going to remember that Amanirenas was a kick-ass Nubian queen who defeated Augustus' great army. After discussing the fascinating content [...] the teacher can then ask the class if they spotted any grammatical errors in the Latin (Ramsby, in *Teaching Latin for Acquisition*, 2022).

More specifically for Latin teachers, debate continues as to whether the subject matter in Latin novellas needs to be strictly historical. Most Latin course books have shown a gradual move since the 1960s towards integrating language and culture in ways that are more than just using culture as an attractive feature (Hunt, 2016; Lister, 2015; 2007; Gay, 2003; Story, 2003). Most teachers would agree that the historically authentic location of the most commonly-used reading-comprehension course books provide a natural setting in which students learn about the language, and for which comprehension of the language provides further insight. Does, then, a Latin story set in more modern times run counter to the generally agreed idea that learning the language is an aid for developing intercultural knowledge and understanding? Maybe we should stop worrying and just learn to love the fact that students might enjoy reading without particular intentions in mind other than pleasure. As for Latinity, we might be perfectly satisfied with stories which engaged them with relatively simple, unadorned Latin, such as might actually have

been used in the street rather than the elaborate, lexically dense and aesthetically complex literature of the classical canon. The texts in course books and modern novellas are as ‘authentic’ for young learners as any other natively-produced works. So one might read Rachel Beth Cuning’s two short Latin novellas *Astronomia: fabula planetarum* [Astronomy: the story of the planets] (2022) and *Erucula: fabula metamorphosis* [The Caterpillar: a story of change] (2021) because they both take non-fiction as their subject matter and show students that Latin can be a means of communication about anything at all. In the same way Anthony Gibbins’ (2022) online version of *Star Wars* in Latin with LEGO illustrations may be as compelling as any story based on historical fiction.

Practices

So much for the novellas themselves. What about classroom practice? Extensive reading is a method used in the classroom in which learners read lots of easy material in the target language (Day & Bamford, 1998). Learners choose their own stories, read them for pleasure and information, sometimes in and sometimes out of class. They change them when they get bored or have finished them, and they seek out stories for themselves or with encouragement from their peers and their teachers, sometimes easier, sometimes a little harder than they are used to reading. Researchers suggest that, through extensive reading practices, learners of languages ‘become better and more confident readers, better writers, better listeners and speakers; their vocabulary improves; they enjoy learning languages’ (Bamford & Day, 2004, 1).

Bamford and Day (2004) describe ten principles of extensive reading practices as part of a school programme:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. There is a wide variety of reading material available for students to choose from.
3. The students choose for themselves.
4. The students read a lot – maybe a book a week.
5. The students’ reading speed should be faster rather than slower; they should not need to use the dictionary, but should be able to guess unfamiliar words.
6. The students should read for pleasure, to learn something new for themselves.
7. The students should read silently, in class or out of it, at their own pace.
8. Reading is its own reward – there may be some follow up, but there is nothing that a teacher does to dissuade students from reading more.
9. The teacher orientates the students to reading, and keeps track. Sometimes they make suggestions.
10. The teacher models reading.
(After Bamford & Day, 2004).

Institutional accountability, as always, makes its presence strongly felt. For institutional ‘buy-in’ the new Latin coursebook *Suburani* (Hands-Up Education, 2020) has published two short novellas based around characters from its own storyline: *Celer* (Long, 2021a) and *Ludi Suburani* (Long, 2021b) (Figure 1). Perhaps such spinoffs could provide the necessary validation in the eyes of senior management at the same time as providing an opportunity for some pleasure reading.



Figure 1. Two spinoff novellas from the Latin coursebook *Suburani*.

Accountability

Should the student be made accountable for reading the novella? A follow up: how should students be reading if there are series of worksheets and other accountability measures on offer? Part of the interest in providing accountability measures may derive from the need to legitimise free voluntary reading in the eyes of senior management (Macalister, 2014): there needs to be visible evidence of learning outcomes and grades often need to be supplied to senior managers at school. Bamford and Day (2004) noted that teachers felt that giving students time just to read seemed almost like an abrogation of duty. Letting students just read seems lax, especially if a member of the senior leadership walks in at that time! Teachers therefore often feel compelled to follow up supposedly free voluntary reading with assessments; but assessment may in their own way undermine the students’ willingness to read. One has to ask if institutional accountability should outweigh pedagogical concerns. Patrick (2019), in her reflections over three years when introducing free voluntary reading in Latin lessons at school, after trialling various measures decided to have no accountability: ‘I have seen much more success this year, across levels, with this new process of individual reading, complete free choice, and full immersion in the experience, than I ever saw with my accountability measures’ (Patrick, 2019, 82). On the other hand, Piazza (2017) recommends a personal reading log – a form of accountability that keeps everyone informed of what the student is reading, but which does not necessarily hold them to account for it. This log later forms the basis of a self-reflective document at the end of the school term or year. Again, this is a developing area of pedagogical interest: a recent Facebook thread showed some very different practices and views even among modern languages teachers as to whether students’ reading of novellas should be held to account and by how much (iFLT/NTPRS/CI Teaching, 2022). The general feeling on that thread was that teachers should follow the recommended practices: the students’ reading habits and knowledge of the stories ought not to be monitored as it would interfere with their own pleasure reading, which in turn would deflect from the development of reading fluency. A number of contributors also noted that students should not be asked to tell others about the stories they were reading or make explicit links between their reading and other knowledge, let alone be quizzed on their reading or reading habits. Others suggested, instead, that students might leave a sticker on the classroom wall to recommend a book to their peers, or to leave a pencil dot on the inside front cover as a guide to other readers as to whether they thought the book was worth reading. Perhaps David




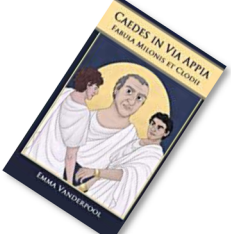

Title Author	Story length and vocabulary	Presentation of language and characteristics of the book
<p>Unguentum Peter Sipes</p> 	<p>55 pages. 128 words.</p>	<p>A version of Catullus poem 13, in 3 tiers, leading back to the original Latin text.</p> <p>Some illustrations; glossing; many repetitions of vocabulary, which is drawn exclusively from the original poem.</p>
<p>Cerberus canis monstruosus Rachel Beth Cuning</p> 	<p>109 pages. 5,200 words. 159 unique words. 113 working vocabulary words.</p>	<p>Cute front cover – everyone loves Cerberus; plot is attractive and endearing, as are illustrations; lots of animals (incl. peacock, dolphins); Gods come in – cultural context; broader themes at play: being accepted for who you are, etc.</p> <p>Language is progressive; repetitive vocabulary; more complex vocabulary is given in bold-clearly glossed; glossary at the back.</p>
<p>Sacri Pulli: a tale of war and chickens Emma Vanderpool</p> 	<p>55 pages. 2,000 words. 6-14 lines per page.</p>	<p>Touches on Roman beliefs about human – god interactions (divine animals, retribution etc); gives some historical context (Punic Wars).</p> <p>1st person point of view – good for beginners; lots of phrases repeated in different grammatical formulations; grammar and vocabulary at the bottom of the page, exam-style.</p>
<p>Caedes in via Appia Emma Vanderpool</p> 	<p>68 pages. 30 pages of vocabulary – all forms listed – at the back.</p>	<p>Story told from the perspectives of the 3 main characters: Clodius, Milo & Cicero. Original account at the back of the book.</p> <p>Reading level: intermediate; repeated phrases; some pictures – mostly faces of the 3 historical figures.</p>
<p>Medea et peregrinus pulcherrimus Rachel Beth Cuning</p> 	<p>98 pages. 237 words. 30 glossed words. Running vocabulary in footnotes. Vocabulary – all forms that appear listed – at the back.</p>	<p>The story of Medea & Jason and the search for the Golden Fleece. Written for an American audience of students in their 3rd-4th year of Latin. Uses pictures and artwork to show different phrases used by author, and historical content.</p> <p>The progressive difficulty makes it suitable as a supplement for practice work; requires a good working knowledge of Latin vocabulary and grammar; the majority of the text is written as speech between the characters; pictures are repeated – do these have a particular role?</p>

Figure 2. Overview of some recently-published Latin novellas





<p>Agrippina auriga Lance Piantaggini</p> 	<p>59 pages. 1800+ words.</p>	<p>Attractive and inviting Uses illustrations to help clarify meaning] For beginners, but uses grammar not introduced until later in Book 3 of Cambridge Latin Course (for example), which might make it difficult for silent sustained independent reading – although there is substantial glossing at the back of the book, with phrases and chunking of vocabulary.</p> <p>Lots of technical vocabulary related to chariot racing (eg <i>meta</i> / <i>turning-post</i>, <i>lora</i> / <i>reins</i>, <i>carcer</i> / <i>starting box</i>, <i>auriga</i> / <i>charioteer</i>, <i>quadriga</i> / <i>chariot team</i>) – perhaps unnecessary and might disrupt flow of intended audience (beginner). Good vocabulary list giving every form and meaning of every word – very clear for students.</p> <p>Diverse characters with a good focus on representation. Culture built-in, with a lot of information on Roman chariot-racing.</p>
<p>Horrificae fabulae nocte narrandae Emma Vanderpool</p> 	<p>64 pages. 24 pages of vocabulary.</p>	<p>Good that Medusa (in story 1) is described as having a beautiful mind as well as a beautiful body. Easily recognisable subjects (ghosts, werewolves etc). Pictures are very helpful and become through repetition like signposts through the stories. Bit of gore is attractive to students. The final story gives students something to ponder with – did he have the mind of a wolf or of a man? Very pacey and immediate; the language increases in complexity as the book progresses; vocabulary is glossed to the right of the story so that reading is not held up; careful with the context so that 'difficult' words are always clear from the context (for example, Indirect Statement is introduced in such a way that the meaning has to make sense from the context).</p>
<p>Sitne amor? Lance Piantaggini</p> 	<p>62 pages.. 2,400 words, 36 cognates. 24 pages of vocabulary – all forms that appear listed – at the back.</p>	<p>Narrative and dialogue provide variety. Illustrations to support meaning. Some glossed vocabulary on the page. The characters appear in other connected novellas. Themes: love and desire and how to express them. Friendship. A major character is non-binary. Reference to myths. Small section about reading Latin poetry.</p>
<p>Roma fervens: viae variae patent. Arienne Blezer-Carroll, Nia Suitt & Ian Hardin</p> 	<p>257 pages. Some of the vocabulary is glossed in footnotes. Large font.</p>	<p>Choose your own adventure story. Description of poverty and living conditions in an <i>insula</i> in urban Rome. Set in the Subura at the time of Nero. Use of humour to engage reader. Told in the 2nd person.</p>

Figure 2 (Continued).




<p>Kandake Amanirenas: regina Nubiae Emma Vanderpool</p> 	<p>60 pages. 7 pages of vocabulary - all forms that appear listed – at the back. Only given a few items of vocabulary on each page. Index of names and places. Large font. Few pages per chapter. 12 chapters.</p>	<p>Focus on Roman history – Augustus and Kandake, the Queen of Nubia.</p>
<p>Medusa: femina potens et fortis Emma Vanderpool</p> 	<p>95 pages. 25 pages of vocabulary - all forms that appear listed – at the back. No Pictures. Vocabulary glosses on the page. Very short chapters.</p>	<p>A fun way to learn about the Greek myths. Told from Medusa's perspective rather than from Perseus'.</p>
<p>Ridiculi et horribiles dei et dee Rachel Beth Cuning</p> 	<p>71 pages. 31 pages of vocabulary. Dictionary style as well as all forms listed in gloss. Lots of pictures. Repetition of sentence structures, which phase out as the book progresses.</p>	<p>Humorous.: for example, glosses the word 'boo!' Broken into shorter stories. Pictures and captions help comprehension. Interesting way to learn mythology. Characterization is good – even if you knew the myth, you'd still want to read.</p>
<p>Eques viridis Andrew Olimpi</p> 	<p>102 pages. 12 pages of vocabulary. Pictures on every page. Slow – suitable for a starting Latin learner.</p>	<p>A retelling of the story of Gawain and the Green Knight. Mysterious setting and ominous storyline.</p>

Figure 2 (Continued).

Pennac's (2006) *Rights of the Reader* are worth recalling here to help remind teachers what reading for pleasure might entail:

- The right not to read
- The right to skip pages
- The right not to finish
- The right to reread
- The right to read anything
- The right for escapism

- The right to read anywhere
- The right to browse
- The right to read aloud
- The right not to defend your tastes (Pennac, 2006).

Again, are teachers prepared to 'let go' of their students' reading habits, when so much traditional Latin teaching appears to be highly-controlled and teacher-orientated? The use of Latin novellas in the classroom remains in its infancy. More work needs to be

done both in publishing suitable works for schools, especially in the UK, and in researching and evaluating their use in the classroom.

Some observations on published novellas.

The Cambridge PGCE teacher-trainees (2021 cohort) studied a selection of Latin novellas³ as part of their Initial Teacher Education course. The selection of novellas was designed to try to cover a range of viewpoint, historical period and subject matter. Their findings are reported below. I follow with a distillation of their comments.

What the teacher-trainees thought was most useful for the readers of novellas was some consistency in presentation, particularly of vocabulary. In the case of the simplest novellas, all forms of the vocabulary that were in use should be given, where met on the page and in the vocabulary list. There was some discussion whether that should be necessary for more advanced readers, without resolution. It was felt that some vocabulary should be glossed on the page as an aid to comprehension – whether at the bottom of the page or at the side – again no firm conclusions. An indication in the book of how many vocabulary items were included was felt to be useful as a guide to readers. Vocabulary chunked into phrases was helpful as a way of improving ‘reading for meaning rather than for words.’ The idea of ‘sheltering’ of vocabulary (i.e. reducing the number of items) but not of syntax was felt to be slightly contrary to the trainee teachers’ way of thinking – my take on this is that long years spent on learning Latin as a set of grammatical features and forms (as required by the UK examination system and promoted through school and university coursebooks and practices) make this conceptually challenging. But beginning students might well not find the idea as challenging as more experienced students. Illustrations were felt to be a key component of helping students visualise the events in the story and support comprehension of the language. Stories where there was at least one picture per page were felt to be more attractive than those with fewer. Images also provided a way in to the text and a reason to keep turning the page. The idea of a compelling single narrative with well-drawn and interesting characters and events was considered to be vital. Novellas which were divided into short chapters seemed more manageable to students and the feeling was that they would feel a strong sense of progression, measured by how many chapters they had covered. The division of a story into chapters made the goal of reading a whole book seem to be more achievable. The story should be sophisticated and age-appropriate – even if the Latin itself was quite simple, the storyline needed to be worthwhile and engaging. Characters should be diverse and ideally child-aged. There should be no questions: the reading of the story was not for a test (in the UK there is something of an obsession with gathering marks for everything that a student does – so this was quite a step away from traditional practices).

The investigation has encouraged a number of the PGCE teacher-trainees to carry out some further, small-scale research into the use of novellas in their own classrooms. I hope to publish their findings in later editions of the *Journal of Classics Teaching* in due course.

Notes

1 This article is expanded from a short section on novellas in *Teaching Latin: contexts, theories, practices* (Hunt, 2022).

2 The topic of errors excited by far the most comment and was itself based on reports from other social media sites detailing some teachers’ complaints about grammatically incorrect Latin (for example) in self-published works.

Concluding remarks from contributors suggested that greater use should be made of peer-review before publication, but that if errors were found to have occurred afterwards, a polite private email to the author could mean that the error could be easily corrected in a print-on-demand work.

3 I am grateful to the Classical Association for purchasing the copies for the purpose of this study and to encourage wider interest among teachers in the UK.

Further Reading

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Webography

- Two YouTube interviews with **Dan Conway**, who has studied the use of novellas, are available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR0wqCcbImn3I4ZytEZcOiRY3Qwa_UqMrZnoWZ8VoeVdrBNAsUOqigrsmWQ&v=8exTIMM4cl4&d=n&app=desktop&ab_channel=BeneNarras%21, and here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f08VFFw2N9c>.
- US Latin teacher **Emma Vanderpool**, the author of several self-published novellas, talks about her work on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWDaw6UXkxI>. She has written a blog on novellas which feature female characters here: <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/education/blog/2021/12/08/uplifting-voices-of-the-past-through-latin-novellas/>.
- US Latin teacher and author **Lance Piantaggini** notes that teachers should be selecting or changing texts for readability rather than changing the tasks to manage the process of teaching a text which is barely comprehensible even to the teacher themselves (Piantaggini, 2022). His website, including details of his own self-published novellas, can be found here: <https://magisterp.com/novellas/>
- US academic **Thomas Hendrickson** has written a blog for the Society for Classical Studies on the rise of the novella. It is available here: <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-blog/thomashendrickson/blog-latin-novellas-and-new-pedagogy>
- US Latin teacher **Hilary Meyrick-Long**, the author of *Suburani's* stablemate novellas *Celer* (Long, 2021a) and *Ludi Suburani* (Long, 2021b), describes (on YouTube) using novellas here: https://youtu.be/pDp8_RHvtck. She is interviewed on YouTube about her work here: <https://youtu.be/G03tqn4dYD8>.
- US Latin teacher and author **John Piazza** maintains a database and blog on Latin novellas here: <http://johnpiazza.net/latin/novels/>.

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