

# THE NEW YORKER

BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED

## ARE WE ROME?

by Cullen Murphy (*Houghton Mifflin*; \$24)

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Murphy writes that “Americans have been casting eyes back to ancient Rome since before the Revolution,” and goes on to interrogate the comparisons drawn both by “triumphalists,” who see the world’s only superpower in terms of the Roman Empire at its height, and by “declinists,” who see America as “dangerously overcommitted abroad and rusted out at home,” like Rome before its fall. Murphy makes telling points about the solipsism of political élites and the impact of corruption and cronyism on civil society, but he stops short of predicting America’s fall. (Indeed, he argues that it is simplistic to say that Rome fell.) Instead, he points to a malaise exemplified by the debasement of the term “franchise,” once associated with freedom to vote, and now with commerce: “Here, in miniature, is the political history of America.” Murphy prescribes antidotes, and finds grounds for cautious optimism in the words of Livy: “An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it.” ♦

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