Did you know that ancient Romans loved oysters, or that some thought human flesh served unwittingly in restaurants tasted a bit like pork, or that doctors were generally viewed with skepticism—an epitaph humorously read, “I died of a surfeit of doctors”—or that ancient prisons were not meant for punishment but for restraining until trial (or execution), or that the standard set by the Roman toilet was not seen again until 19th century Europe, or that Romans had fetishes for drawing the phallus, for lewd humor, or for relieving themselves on tombstones? J.C. McKeown’s book is a treasure-trove of snippets like these from the Roman world.

The chapters are organized topically, and include both standard (law, religion, government, education, the army) and nonstandard (spectacles, toilets, Romans at sea) aspects of Roman culture. But even within the chapters the typical and atypical are laced together. For example, in the midst of detailing how Romans ended a siege by slaughtering humans, dogs, and other animals—a practice traced to Scipio (209 BCE)—McKeown provides an interesting historical addendum from the protracted siege of Tyana (272 CE) when the Emperor Aurelian promised to “not leave a dog in this town,” but, in his clemency after the city fell, ordered his soldiers to preserve the citizens and only kill the dogs (34). Similarly, when discussing Roman religion, snide comments by elites like Ovid—“It is convenient that the gods should exist…” (78)—and Quintilian—“Even the Salian priests themselves have no clear understanding of the hymns they sing…” (81)—are interwoven with important historical details about, for example, the preservation of the collections of prophecies and warnings called the Sibylline Oracles (80), and illustrations of Roman sacred rituals, including pictures of voodoo dolls from Roman Egypt (86), of a life-sized depiction of a sheep’s liver with notations aiding divination (88), and of a bust of the bearded Rain God (90). McKeown pearl-strings relevant primary data from anecdotes, illustrations, and quotations, and introduces many of them with his own interpretive insights as a scholar of classics, so that each chapter reads more like an entertaining encyclopedia of Roman culture than stages of a thesis-driven monograph.
While the book is quite delighting to read, it is also eminently informative, and any scholar of antiquity would find it useful. Its strength is the collection of wide-ranging source material that uncovers an amusing cross-section of the Roman world. The chapters on family life, Roman names, slaves, farming, religion, and Roman pornography are especially notable because of the very human picture they paint of antique culture: Roman citizens had three names (16); Roman stepmothers were notoriously abusive (6-7); slaves had unflattering names like “little donkey” (116); it was an ill-omen if both oxen in a team defecated simultaneously (84); some Roman emperors, like Vespasian, were thought to have the gift of healing (83); a brothel in Pompeii was laden with salacious graffiti (195); and depictions of the phallus were thought capable of warding off evil spirits or bad luck (79-80). The benefit of such information is that it provides a fuller picture of Roman culture beyond the one-dimensional cliché that defines ancient Romans as pragmatic, ruthless, and militaristic. To be sure, they were all of those things, but by mixing in the bizarre, the humorous, and the remarkable, McKeown has painted a tapestry that is at once richer and also quite stimulating.

David A. Kaden
University of Toronto
Centre for the Study of Religion
david.kaden@utoronto.ca