When Gabriele d’Annunzio lived in Rome as a young man in the 1880s he had a room above a brothel not far from the Piazza di Spagna, but dreamed of living, like the hero of his first novel, *Il Piacere*, in a palazzo at the top of the Spanish steps. An ardent admirer of the English Romantics, he called himself Ariel (as Shelley had before him), wore a ring he claimed had once belonged to Byron, and went often to the Protestant Cemetery to lay white roses on Keats’s grave.

Gabriele d'Annunzio was Italy's premier poet at a time when poetry could trigger riots. A brilliant self-publicist, he used his fame to sell his work, seduce women (the great actress Eleonora Duse, among them) and promote his extreme nationalism. At once an aesthete and a militarist, he enjoyed risking death no less than making love, and he wrote with equal enthusiasm about Fortuny gowns and torpedoes. In 1915 his incendiary oratory helped drive Italy into the First World War, and in 1919 he lead a troop of mutineers into the Croatian port of Fiume, where he established a delinquent city-state. Futurists, anarchists, communists and proto-fascists descended on the place (Mussolini being among the visitors), along with literati and thrill-seekers, drug dealers and prostitutes. After fifteen months the regime was brought to an end, but it would have its sequel less than two years later, when the fascists marched on Rome, belting out anthems they'd learned in Fiume. As Daniel Swift wrote in the New Statesman ‘If you want to understand fascism, you have to begin with d’Annunzio, and if you want to understand d’Annunzio, this is your book’.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett’s compelling biography has just been named Paddy Power Biography of the Year, having already won the three most prestigious British prizes for non-fiction – the Samuel Johnson Prize, the Costa Biography Award and the Duff Cooper Prize. James McConnachie, speaking for the Samuel Johnson judges, said it ‘could, and should, change the way biography is written’. It was chosen over twenty times in the Christmas Books of the Year lists and has had fantastic reviews, most recently in the New York Review of Books where David Gilmour described it as a ‘wonderful biography’… ‘a magnificent and beautifully-written book’.

It is published in English by Fourth Estate (UK) and Knopf (USA), and in Italian by Rizzoli