

BOOKS
REVIEWSBond villains
in Babylonia

The historical accuracy of Dr Irving Finkel's first novel is a given – but it's a ripping yarn too. By Jake Kerridge



THE WRITING IN THE STONE
by Irving Finkel
142pp, Medina, £20
★★★★★

It was one of the boasts of Gilbert and Sullivan's Modern Major-General that he could write a washing bill in Babylonian cuneiform. That's the sort of thing that I suspect Irving Finkel does for fun over breakfast instead of the crossword. Dr Finkel is the British Museum's assistant keeper of ancient Mesopotamian script, languages and cultures. He spends his days deciphering cuneiform, the early system of writing invented by the Sumerians that comprises wedge-shaped marks made on clay tablets, tens of thousands of which survive.

Dr Finkel has become an engaging presence on television documentaries in recent years. You may remember him, as he has the distinctive appearance favoured by celebrity boffins in the making, in his case with a voluminous beard – the look he

appears to be going for is Anthony Trollope emerging from a lengthy hostage situation.

An infectiously enthusiastic communicator, Dr Finkel has written several popular books on his discipline, and also a number of stories for children. Now he has published his first novel, set in ancient Mesopotamia in the seventh century BC. We may take the accuracy of the novel's backdrop as read – or, at least, we won't easily be able to lay our hands on somebody with the authority to gainsay it – but I am pleased to report that Dr Finkel's book has narrative drive, too.

To begin with the end, Dr Finkel explains in an afterword that the book was inspired by an object uncovered in Iraq, thought to be a bit of a handle broken off some kind of pot or jug made of marble or limestone. By fluke, the cracked face of this object is made up of wedge shapes, so that it “resembles the historic cuneiform script of ancient Mesopotamia to a quite startling degree”. If a literate person had stumbled on an object like this two-and-a-half millennia ago, it would have been the equivalent of somebody today breaking a piece of rock and finding writing, in an unknown language but a recognisable alphabet, on the broken surface. Back then (and perhaps today as well) the immediate thought would be: this must be a message from the gods.

Dr Finkel's novel begins with a

PUSSY GALORE
Assyrian relief from Nineveh of a royal lion hunt, from 645–635 BC



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priest in rural Babylonia discovering just such a fragment of stone among the possessions of an itinerant healer who has just died. He hotfoots it to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, to consult with King Ashurbanipal, whom Dr Finkel portrays as a man of thought rather than action, and who relishes power only because it allows him to devote himself to slightly eccentric scholarly pursuits: I pictured an ancient Assyrian Prince Charles.

Unfortunately, the King gives the stone to his head scholar, a character known only as the Chief Exorcist, who is a power-crazed psychopath. We are given a rundown of how, after murdering his sister at the age of 12 to see if he could get away with it, he has plotted, killed and maimed his way to becoming one of the

King's chief advisers.

He decides to head off on a journey into Babylonia to find the source of the stone and decipher the gods' message; along the way he kills anyone who has the slightest inkling of the stone's existence with the help of his sidekick the Cook, a mute giant with three testicles. The Chief Exorcist can call on expert knowledge of hypnosis, voodoo and black magic to help him in his programme of slaughter, although he seems happy with simpler methods if they can present him with a good Bond villain-style exit line: “He'll dry out like an Egyptian,” he says, after locking somebody in a trunk.

It's a quest story with villains as the heroes, with plenty of supernatural elements: ghosts, demons, dragons, a talking skull

The straight-faced narration makes some scenes camper than perhaps intended

and a woman giving birth to a “misbegotten horror” that “seemed to be a cross between a monkey and a bat”. Dr Finkel's straight-faced narration contributes to some scenes being camper than he may have intended, but as with the best Hammer Horror films this

does not preclude genuine terror-inducing moments. His style is formal but not stilted and he often has a striking turn of phrase, as when one female murder victim is consigned to a river “with a necklace of stones as dowry”.

I was reminded of Agatha Christie's *Death Comes as the End*, which is set in Thebes in 2000 BC, but only superficially. Christie's novel unfolds to show that ancient peoples were much more like us than we might suppose; Dr Finkel's story seems to me to capture convincingly a human culture that seems disconcertingly alien. If he had claimed to have translated this compact, entertaining curio from a newly unearthed cuneiform tablet, I might have believed him.

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PAPERBACKS
READ THIS WEEK

CHURCHILL AND IRELAND
by Paul Bew
240pp, OUP, £9.99
★★★★★

“It is a curious reflection,” remarked Churchill in 1921, “to inquire why Ireland should bulk so largely in our lives.” Bew's elegant, meticulous study of his role in Irish history is filled with surprises, and gives nuance to Churchill's fiery rhetoric, particularly on Ireland's neutral stance in the Second World War.



AMERICAN WAR
by Omar El Akkad
352pp, Picador, £7.99
★★★★★

This solemn piece of speculative fiction, set in the late 21st century, imagines what would happen if America had another civil war – over fossil fuels. It's a powerful idea, but El Akkad uses it to explore current global conflicts rather than building a convincing alternative world.



I'D DIE FOR YOU
by F Scott Fitzgerald
384pp, Scribner, £9.99
★★★★★

This collection of lost stories is a ragtag bundle of surprises, irrelevancies and delights. Some of the tales, about vapid New Englanders and Ivy League jocks, are forgettable. But others read like shards of Fitzgerald's best work, exploring sexual fantasies and broken relationships in beautifully lapidary prose.

CRIME FICTION

Mametland...
where no one
ever shuts up

The playwright's first novel in years leaves Jake Kerridge happy but needing a lie down



CHICAGO
by David Mamet
338pp, Custom House, £20, ebook £11.99
★★★★★

David Mamet confers on most of his characters, even the dull salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the witty hyper-eloquence of Wildean nobles. His work often calls to mind DH Lawrence's poem “When I Read Shakespeare”: “How boring, how small Shakespeare's people are! Yet the language so lovely! like the dyes from gas-tar.”

Mamet's latest project is a novel, his first for nearly 20 years, but he clearly does not believe that the threshold of tolerability for stylised dialogue is lower on the page than on the stage. A sentence and a half is the maximum length for which any character speaks like a human being. The book is ostensibly set in Twenties Chicago, but despite the presence of speakeasies, journalists with eyeshades, merciless gangsters and even less scrupulous molls, we are really in Mametland, where talking is more essential to life than breathing, and the reader is too busy listening to have time to take in the scenery.

I simpered with pleasure, and

only partly the pleasure of familiarity, at the oblique comedy of Mamet's dialogue. (“What was that War about?” “They shot the Archduke Ferdinand. What would you do?”) Perhaps, though, I enjoyed the more bravura passages because I have been schooled in how to hear Mamet dialogue through watching many movies; I suspect they would be even better appreciated if heard being declaimed by actors who have been directed by Mamet to within an inch of their lives.

The plot, which sees *Chicago Tribune* journalist Mike Hodge investigating the murder of two bootleggers, unfolds at a snail's pace; it's a MacGuffin, an excuse for the talk (which feels like it ought to be leaving deadlier wounds than the guns). The writing eventually loses some of its intensity as Mamet sweats to tie up his plot threads, but by then the reader may be glad of a rest. *Chicago* made me very tired and very happy.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

I'm not sad
he's dead –
am I wicked?

This is a gem among a slew of novels marking the Armistice centenary, says Emily Bearn



THE GOOSE ROAD
by Rowena House
384pp, Walker Books, £7.99, ebook £7.99
★★★★★

While the Second World War has inspired some of the most famous children's novels of the past half-century (*The Silver Sword*, *Carrie's War*, *Goodnight Mister Tom*), the First World War has produced fewer. It is our ever-prolific Michael Morpurgo who has probably done most to shape children's impressions, with his bestselling novels *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful*. But now the balance is truly being redressed, with the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day triggering a barrage of new children's fiction set during the First World War.

The Goose Road, a debut novel by the former Reuters correspondent Rowena House, is one of the gems. The story begins in 1916, when Angelique, a 14-year-old French farm girl, learns that her drunkard father has been killed on the battlefield. “Am I wicked, I wonder, a heartless, unforgivable child because I'm not sad he's dead?” While her mother grieves,

Angelique determines to keep the farm intact for her brother Pascal, who has also gone to fight: “If nothing ever changes, then maybe he won't change either.” When the Requisition plunders the farm, Angelique flees across France with her flock of Toulouse geese, which she plans to sell to save the family home.

House is a wonderful storyteller, combining simple prose with a relish for domestic detail. Angelique's relationship with her geese, led by the gander Napoleon, is particularly charming (“I wish he could fly just this once, and wheel freely in the glittering heavens... But he's too heavy”). House explains in an afterword the extent to which the story was inspired by true events; but, like all the best historical novelists, she focuses on the fiction rather than the facts. This is a story that young readers will remember long after GCSE timelines have been forgotten.

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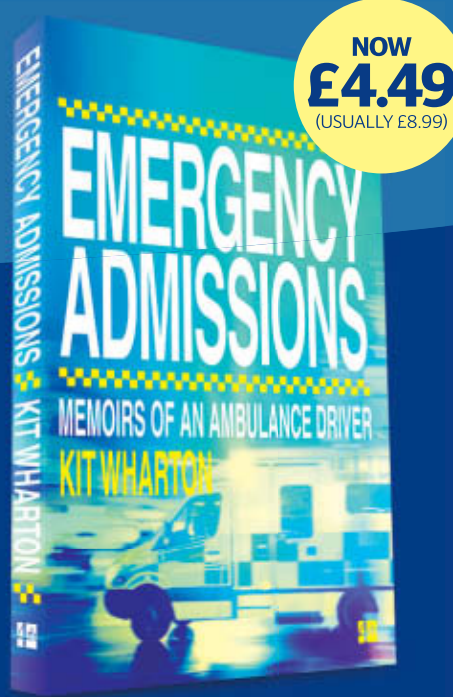
Emergency Admissions by Kit Wharton

An S&M party gone horribly wrong, a dead man locked in a car with a hungry bull terrier, a teenage girl with suspicious abdominal pains and a man who's fainted, frightened he was allergic to his cheese and onion sandwich. It's just another day at work for Kit Wharton. After a childhood punctuated by parental fighting, stints in journalism and house removals, Kit joined the NHS ambulance service. He hasn't looked back. This is his report from the front line: 999 calls that hurtle him to the critical moment in other peoples' lives.

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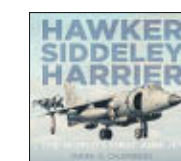
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