

IN ENGLISH NOVELIST IAIN PEARS'S LATEST NOVEL, *Stone's Fall* (see our review below), a wealthy financier and arms dealer mysteriously dies in London in 1909. As the book moves backward in time to 1890 Paris and 1867 Venice, the truth about the man's death emerges. Like the widely acclaimed *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1998), *Stone's Fall* is a puzzle of a book filled with deceptions and false leads, where murder, love, and espionage come together in a smart, riveting historical thriller.

Although Pears (1955—) explores erudite historical issues in much of his work, from the growth of empirical science in 17th-century England, to questions of morality in the Roman Empire, to high finance during World War I, his intricately plotted novels appeal to wide audiences; he is the consummate storyteller. Pears began his career not as a novelist but as an art historian. After completing a doctorate in art history at Oxford and authoring a history of 17th- and 18th-century British art, *A Discovery of Painting* (1989), he turned to journalism. He reported for the BBC and Reuters and worked as a television consultant in England, France, Italy, and the United States before settling in Oxford with his wife. In 1991, he combined his love of journalism and art in *The Raphael Affair*, the first novel in a seven-part contemporary art history mystery series set in Italy and featuring sleuthing art historian Jonathan Argyll. The series, which merged the worlds of art and crime, drew a loyal following.

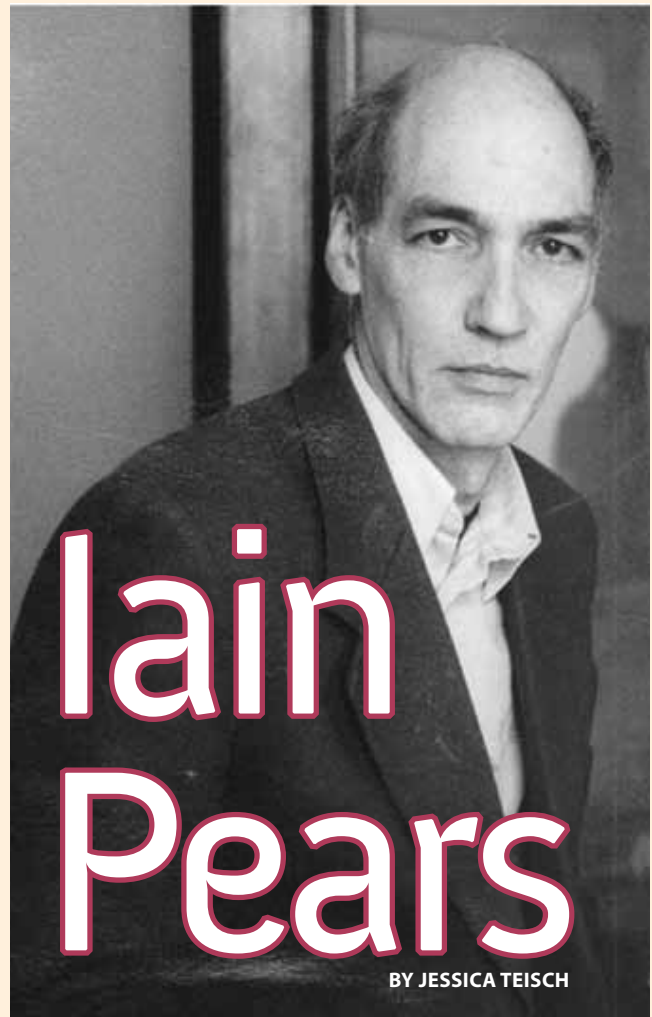
It wasn't until the publication of *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, an ambitious philosophical mystery novel which critics compared to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, that Pears obtained international acclaim. The novels that followed, including *The Dream of Scipio* (2002), *The Portrait* (2005), and now, *Stone's Fall*, similarly combine Pears's love of mystery and big ideas as he locates and explores the pulse of critical junctures in history. "Ideas hold the books together," Pears told *Bookmarks*. "Without the questions about science and truth which occur in *Fingerpost*, the book would make no sense at all. Equally, in the *Dream of Scipio*, the characters relate to each other through their common inheritance, which is a certain sequence of ideas about the nature and duties of civilization. Without those, they would never come into contact, and so the book could not have been written."

THE BREAKTHROUGH NOVEL

An Instance of the Fingerpost (1998)



This dense novel is one of ideas and political intrigue, *Rashomon*-like deceptions and self-deceptions. The title comes from Francis Bacon's claim that while all evidence is imperfect, the fingerpost "points in one direction only, and allows of no other possibility." The novel explores the Restoration era's larger canvas: the dawn of the Enlightenment and questions about reason and observation, as well



as the sects, superstition, witch hunts, conspiracies, and religious strife that marked the times. Most of the characters are actual historical figures.

THE STORY: In 1663 Oxford, England, just after Charles II regains the throne, Dr. Robert Grove is found dead, possibly by murder. His former servant and alleged mistress, Sarah Blundy, is accused and hanged—perhaps too soon. As four witnesses tell their version of events, they correct each others' stories and shed light on the political, religious, and intellectual turmoil of the Restoration era. Visiting Venetian physician Marco da Cola may not be what he seems. Student Jack Prestcott escaped from prison the night of Grove's death—and wishes to clear his traitorous father's name. Famed mathematician and cryptographer Dr. John Wallis finds conspiracy theories in the new monarchy. Finally, historian Anthony Wood weighs in—and the book's deepest mysteries come to light.

"An Instance of the Fingerpost is a good deal more than a detective story. The whodunit element, prominent in the opening section, recedes in importance as the book broadens out to embrace more complex material." ANDREW MILLER, NEW YORK

TIMES, 3/22/98

INTERVIEW WITH IAIN PEARS

BM: What was the inspiration for *Stone's Fall*?

IP: The inspiration was going into a bookshop and realizing that all the sort of history common when I was young—particularly 19th-century social and economic history—has all but vanished from the shelves, to be largely replaced by biographies of the illustrious dead, particularly duchesses. As industry and finance have always been something that English novelists have shied away from as well—the exception being Mrs. [Elizabeth] Gaskell—I thought it would be a good idea to use these as a topic and attempt a one-man revival.

BM: What were the most interesting aspects of your research for *Stone's Fall*?

IP: As I was once both a historian and a financial journalist, a lot of the material was already familiar, but the research trips were fun—I managed to set one part of the book in Venice, with another large scene in Biarritz, so felt obliged to sacrifice myself and spend some time in both places.

BM: What did you uncover in your research for *Stone's Fall* that might surprise readers?

IP: That crises which threaten to bring down the world's financial system are not unusual events; in fact, they pop up every 30 years or so. This was not something I'd intended at the time. I had no idea when I began the book three years ago that modern reality would start paralleling one of the major plot lines of the book. But because of it, I was ready for the sight of vain and irresponsible bankers turning the world upside down and causing chaos all around them. But I think banks went bust with more style and flair in the 19th century.

BM: What books have you recently enjoyed?

IP: At the moment (and later than most people, as it came out several years ago), I'm reading *The Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón. An extraordinary, haunting book, and I'm still not quite certain how he does it. Technically it is a remarkable achievement, and one of those very rare books which manages to create an atmosphere in your mind that lingers even when you stop reading. Very impressive indeed. ■

"Every sentence in the book is as solid as brick—and as treacherous as quicksand. ... [W]ith perfect mastery Pears gradually takes us from an unexplained death in a small college town to a revelation that could shake the foundations of England and the world." MICHAEL DIRDA, WASHINGTON POST, 3/8/1998

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOLLOW-UP

The Dream of Scipio (2002)



When societies start to collapse, is it better to try to act justly and risk doing harm, or is it better to spurn evil by turning away? Pears's second stand-alone novel, which takes place in Provence over a period of 1,500 years, weaves together three stories that deal with questions of law and order, good and evil, and love, power, and wisdom in times of turmoil. The stories are linked by a manuscript titled "The Dream of Scipio," after the philosophical treatise by Manlius Hippiomanes based on that by Cicero.

(★★★ Nov/Dec 2002)

THE STORY: Manlius Hippiomanes, a Neoplatonist scholar and unlikely bishop of the early Christian church, destroys a Jewish community for a stated larger good. His philosophical essay passes down through following generations, and the choice he presents between action and nonparticipation resounds with two characters living 600 years apart. Oliver de Noyen, a poet in Avignon, grapples with a terrible dilemma at the onset of the Black Death in 1347. Julien Barneuve, a 20th-century scholar and government censor in Nazi-occupied France, questions his own moral responsibility to his Jewish colleagues. One of the characters aptly captures the book's essence: "The evil committed by good men is the worst of all, because they know better and do it anyway."

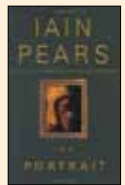
"Each of his characters grapples with the moral issues surrounding the ideas of loyalty and integrity when these are tested by war, the threat of torture and death. Each one has to decide, ultimately, between resistance and appeasement, to disentangle the wish for self-preservation from the reasoning which glosses self-deceiving ways of achieving it." MICHELE

ROBERTS, TIMES (UK), 5/15/02

"The novel contains one of the most bone-chilling acts in modern literature. ... [Pears] provides no clear answers for the questions he raises. But he creates real people wrapped up in exciting times." LEN BARCOUSKY, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE, 11/17/02

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

The Portrait (2005)



Pears draws on his knowledge of art history in his third stand-alone novel, a 200-page monologue that, under the pretense of focusing on the relationship between artist and critic, delves into deeper themes of power, memory, crime, and retribution. A little less sprawling and complicated than his previous two novels, yet richer and more satisfying than his Jonathan Argyll mystery series, *The*

Portrait is just that—a portrait of a single episode, a lone, fascinating rant. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2005)

THE STORY: Henry MacAlpine, a renowned British portraitist in 1900s London, has moved to a remote island off the coast of Brittany. He brings his colleague William Naysmith, England's most incisive art critic, to sit for a portrait. While Naysmith sits, silent, MacAlpine talks. We learn of the pair's friendship, of Naysmith's brilliance (he was one of the first in the London art scene to appreciate French impressionism), and of Naysmith's delight in power. MacAlpine and Pears both have something up their sleeves: over the course of this short, taut novel, it becomes clear that MacAlpine wants vengeance, because the power-mad Naysmith has destroyed the careers and lives of numerous artists. Or has he?

"Those too embarrassed to admit they enjoyed *The Da Vinci Code* will welcome Pears's smart little psychological thriller. ... Refreshingly, the critic doesn't have the last word; in fact, he's disconcertingly silent." DANA KENNEDY, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 5/22/05

THE NEW NOVEL



Stone's Fall

By Iain Pears



THE STORY: In Victorian Europe, the convergence of modern finance, industry, and politics changed the world forever. Through three interlocking stories, *Stone's Fall* explores this transformation. In London in 1909, John Stone (Lord Ravenscliff), a powerful financier and arms manufacturer, falls to his death—perhaps murdered. His will

bestows his fortune to a love child that his glamorous but deceiving wife, Elizabeth, never knew existed. She hires a young journalist, Matthew Braddock, who starts to ask questions about Stone's vast empire and its connection to British politics. The narrative then shifts backwards in time to 1890 Paris and Henry Cort, a banker turned spy. Finally, in 1867 Venice, Stone himself recounts two life-changing events—a romance and the engineering of a weapon—and the shocking truth about his death becomes clear.

Spiegel & Grau. 608 pages. \$27.95. ISBN: 0385522843

Seattle Times ★★★★★

"Stone's Fall is the best kind of fiction: a powerful combination of storytelling and ideas. The former keeps us mesmerized; the latter prompts us to reflect. It's a luminous example of how writers can blur, with great success, the porous barrier between 'popular' and 'serious' literature." ADAM WOOG

Scotsman (UK) ★★★★★

"It is a novel which frequently and daringly challenges

credibility, skating on the thinnest of ice, and yet meets that challenge successfully every time. It may not go as deep as Pears's masterpiece to date—which I hold to be *The Death of Scipio* rather than the bestseller, *An Instance of the Fingerpost*—and as an example of the sort of fiction which invites the willing suspension of disbelief, it is outstanding."

ALLAN MASSIE

Los Angeles Times ★★★★★

"Each section reads almost like a self-contained novel, but slowly various elements—seemingly minor or disconnected—converge to offer the full story. ... [*Stone's Fall*] demands slow reading (and even rereading) as the many pieces of this intricate puzzle masterfully come together." CARMELA CIURARU

Times (UK) ★★★★★

"There is barely any sex, not much action, but an awful lot of fastidiously plotted intrigue and deft period atmosphere. And, by the end, we realise that Pears has a great subject after all—not finance really, but *Lady Ravenscliff*." HELEN RUMBELOW

Telegraph (UK) ★★★★★

"The novel is above all a romp, albeit an exceptionally intelligent and entertaining one." DAVID ROBSON

Entertainment Weekly ★★★

"[A] labyrinthine historical thriller that travels (sometimes nimbly, sometimes ploddingly) back to the dawn of modern trading and on through two world wars. ... This is a massive and well-made book, one ultimately better at characterizing money matters than human affairs." JULIA HOLMES

Sunday Times (UK) ★★★

"Stone's Fall still has a distinct but not unpleasant odour of genre fiction about it, from the slickness of the title onwards. At just over 600 convoluted pages it is a pretty heavy piece of light reading, but it certainly entertains, it even informs after a fashion, and it is altogether a generous, triple-decker slab of upmarket historical hokum." PHIL BAKER

CRITICAL SUMMARY

"Think of a subject so dull that no one would possibly think to make a thriller out of it. Now double the length of said thriller. Then add the author Iain Pears—and you've got a weird magic trick on your hands," noted the *Times* in amazement. Although he introduces complex ideas about global finance and industry, Pears humanizes them through his wholly compelling characters—engaging, shady, and unreliable—and detailed settings, from anarchist meetings to Parisian salons. Riveting, smart, and thoroughly enjoyable, this historical thriller may initially baffle readers, but the mysteries presented in each section *do* coalesce. A few critics complained of clichés, esoteric concepts, and the book's length, but the *Seattle Times* summed up sentiment: "The heft may be daunting, but this erudite *tour de force* is more than worth the time invested." ■