

paperbacks

FICTION

Reviewed by Charmaine Chan



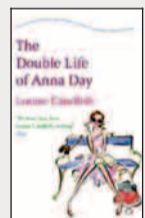
Chinatown Beat
by Henry Chang
Soho Crime, HK\$172
★★★★☆

It wouldn't be a police procedural without staccato sentences, impolite sex, hardcore violence and cops with tough exteriors but tortured consciences. Although *Chinatown Beat* conforms to type, it loosens the straitjacket to give the reader noir crime fiction that has room for more than the genre normally offers. Henry Chang's literary debut introduces NYPD detective Jack Yu, a Chinese-American born and raised in Chinatown who returns to his "hood" to make a difference. This is where triad blood brothers mix with whores, and fortune-tellers aid the police. Crime isn't so much underground as behind walls the community has put up to set itself apart. So when a 10-year-old girl is assaulted by a serial rapist, her family hesitates in seeking help. But Yu speaks their language, so is given entrée to investigate this and other felonies, including the murder of a local crime lord. Culture adds flavour to the story hotpot, but Chang, who grew up in Chinatown and continues to live there, overdoes the use of Chinese terms where their English equivalents would suffice.



Mortal Coil
by Anthony McGowan
Hodder & Stoughton, HK\$112
★★★★☆

Anthony McGowan's novel borrows its title from *Hamlet* and the 1980s pop group founded by Ivo Watts-Russell: protagonist Matthew Moriarty bids farewell to a friend by playing This Mortal Coil's version of *Song to the Siren*. His mate, a musician called Ju, is dead because he went into business with local thug Bernie Mueller. Moriarty, a night-school teacher who doubles as a bouncer, is already familiar with the modus operandi of the gangster, who had him beaten nearly to death because he refused Mueller entry to a fancy bar. Then there was the unwise move by Moriarty of having sex with the brute's wife, and the monetary decision to track down Ju, who vanished half way through recording an album. One bad decision leads to another and violence feeds on itself. McGowan (who made an impressive debut with *Stag Hunt*) shows London at its grimmest and its people in an unflattering, forbidding condition. His narrative rarely relaxes its grip, clutching the reader all the way to the well-thought-out ending.



The Double Life of Anna Day
by Louise Candlish
Sphere, HK\$112
★★★★☆

Louise Candlish is right when she describes her writing as being "on the literary side of chick lit", although you wouldn't know it if you were to judge her book by its ditsy cover. True to the genre, *The Double Life of Anna Day* concerns modern-day relationships, although the story has little to do with hooking a man. Anna Day already has a boyfriend; in fact she and "Dulwich Charlie" have been an item for more than a year. She knows he's a one-in-a-million catch, but she's prepared to go behind his back for one thing: access to his mother (and her prospective mother-in-law). Charlie has never brought Anna home because he fears his mother (a cross between Margaret Thatcher and Jackie Kennedy) won't approve. But then he has to leave London for three months, which gives Anna time to begin her charm offensive. That involves garden parties, tennis dos and Laura Ashley frocks. With a plot as simple as this, Candlish does well to sustain interest. Readers won't find it a stretch to hang on until the end, which satisfies even if it fails to sizzle.

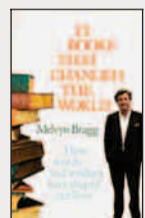
NON-FICTION

Reviewed by Tim Cribb



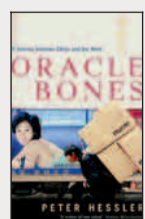
Tiger Force
by Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss
Hodder & Stoughton, HK\$128
★★★★☆

"It was just murder," Sergeant Gerald Bruner is quoted as saying in *Tiger Force*. "It was plain, flat-out murder." Between 1971 and 1975, army investigators gathered evidence of war crimes committed in 1967 by the 101st Airborne's elite Tiger Force in Vietnam's central highlands. The investigators found hundreds of villagers had been slaughtered, a dead baby decapitated for a necklace, an old man shot point-blank by the commanding lieutenant, ears and scalps taken. Michael Sallah, 49, Mitch Weiss, 46, and Joe Mahr, 33, of the *Toledo Blade* won the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism in 2004 for their four-part series *Buried Secrets, Brutal Truths*. *Tiger Force* tells the story from the viewpoint of the soldiers and the villagers who survived. The authors don't excuse these men, now in the 60s, for what they did, but offer an explanation of why they did it. The army knew what was happening, but did nothing and then buried the 55-page report. Parallels with Iraq may be drawn. Donald Rumsfeld was defence secretary then, too.



12 Books that Changed the World
by Melvyn Bragg
Sceptre, HK\$144
★★★★☆

British cultural commentator Melvyn Bragg, sometimes criticised as a populist in his quest to boil down complicated ideas and shades of thinking into readily digestible chunks of information, is better on television than he is on paper. *12 Books that Changed the World* reads like a rehash of his television treatment for the series of the same name. Even the illustrations look like carefully selected stills from the visual sequences that accompany his dialogue about Darwin's *On the Origins of the Species* or Faraday's *Experimental Researches in Electricity* or Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, none of which, more than a few critics have pointed out, is actually a book. The King James Bible, being the English translation of a rather older document and aimed at enforcing the use of English in places such as Scotland and Wales, can't really be called a world-changing book, though the Gutenberg Bible was on several levels. And the Magna Carta is no more a book than the Constitution. Have a look at the *Penguin Great Ideas* (HK\$50) series for 20 world-changing books. Meanwhile, best wait for the DVD.



Oracle Bones - A Journey Between China and the West
by Peter Hessler
John Murray, HK\$144
★★★★☆

As Beijing correspondent for *The New Yorker* - his Chinese credentials say "New York person" magazine - Peter Hessler doesn't write the largely imaginary "big picture" story of China but focuses on making sense of the here and now. *Oracle Bones - A Journey Between China and the West* leaves the reader closer to understanding China, and more confused. Being able to hold simultaneous though contradictory viewpoints is the secret to understanding China - ideological communism and pragmatic capitalism, hating America while craving its respect. Hessler's first book, *River Town*, about his experiences teaching English at a teacher-training college in Sichuan Province, revealed an eye for the incongruous and a deadpan style that conveys much without seeming to do so. In *Oracle Bones*, he follows the lives of several of his *River Town* students, recounts the adventures of a minority Uyghur whose mastery of bureaucratic rules and officialdom lands him a US visa, and uses the shards of ancient writing, "oracle bones", to recall China's past that is both forgotten and remembered.

Journalist-turned-publisher James Atlas is on a mission to bring what he calls real Chinese literature to an international audience, writes Zhang Lijia

Hearing voices



JAMES ATLAS WALKS along the hutong in the shadow of Beijing's Drum Tower, taking in everything with wonder: the fading "Long Live Chairman Mao" slogan on the wall; the names of newly elected neighbourhood committee members displayed for public viewing; and rows of white cabbage drying on grey tiled rooftops. "Fascinating," the New York publisher says, as a pedlar shouting "fur-lined mattress for sale" rides by on a tricycle laden with goods. "Beijing is totally fascinating."

"Back at home, when I told people I was coming to China, they all went, 'wow', as if I were going to the Arctic to explore. You see, for us, China is still an exotic place. And it is," he says with a smile.

The literary journalist-turned-publisher is here to sign an agreement between his Atlas Books and Hong Kong literary agent Creative Work to bring Chinese writers to an international audience. Having worked for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* magazine as an editor and critic, and with two acclaimed biographies to his name (*Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet and Bellows: A Biography*), Atlas is a familiar name in the publishing world.

He came to publishing late and almost by accident. Working for the *Times*, he spent 10 years researching and writing his biography of fellow Chicagoan, Jewish intellectual and Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow. It was the first comprehensive bio-

asia specific

graphy of the literary giant and as Atlas struggled with the 1,000-page manuscript, he had an idea. "It was a light bulb moment," he says. "I remember it vividly. It took place in Central Park. I thought: short biographies by great writers." When he mentioned the idea to a Penguin editor, it was taken up with enthusiasm and the Viking Penguin Lives Series was born.

The series of "biographical essays" he envisioned took off as writers, at Atlas' invitation, wrote on whoever they felt passionate about: the likes of Jane Smiley on Dickens, and Jonathan Spence on Mao.

When he started his own company, Atlas Books, in December 2002, he further diversified: writers on science in co-operation with W.W. Norton; and the *Eminent Lives* series in co-operation with HarperCollins. All were short and biographical in style.

Atlas has had a passion for biography since he studied at Oxford under accomplished biographer Richard Ellmann. Instead of completing his degree, he began his own biography of Delmore Schwartz, a

promising poet whose life took a tragic turn. The result was nominated for the National Book Award for its precise and graceful writing, and biography has remained Atlas' favourite literary genre.

"It's the most compelling way to tell stories," he says. And he's pleased to see literary biography gaining in popularity. "America as well as the world is experiencing a frantic pace of change and transformation. We need lucidity. We need to understand our culture and history."

He might add to that the need for an understanding of other cultures. Through the sale of foreign rights, Atlas has come to know publishers and book dealers from around the world. "I'm appalled by the fact that Americans read so few foreign titles," he says.

Atlas says his curiosity about China was "the most natural thing. Although the general public doesn't know much about China, the business pages have plenty of reports about its economic growth and how it will become an important force - a force that will dominate the 21st century."

Then there were the articles in *The New Yorker* by American writer Peter Hessler, one of which detailed his experience teaching English at a small town by the Yangtze River. "I was fascinated by his stories, not only by the depth of his reporting but also the depth of his immersion in the culture," Atlas says.

One chance incident pushed Atlas into

action. Overhearing a smart, young intern speaking what sounded like an alien language on the phone in his offices, Atlas asked: "Are you fooling around, or do you really speak Chinese?" On learning that the young man had majored in Putonghua at Columbia University, Atlas sent him off to China to find out what mainland books might be marketable in the west.

When Atlas was introduced to Ilyas Khan, a co-founder of Creative Work, the first literary agency in Asia outside Japan, the two men began discussing possible projects. Atlas Books now plans to publish in the US a series of books focusing on social issues and cultural change on the mainland.

"Articles such as Peter Hessler's are wonderful," says Atlas. "But I also want to hear voices of the Chinese people - voices that haven't been heard before. I'm intrigued by the stories of people I've met here - writers, journalists and activists."

"If this daughter of a high-ranking official can write about her experience in prison during the Cultural Revolution; and this lawyer who dares to fight against authority writes about his own life story, in a personal way, how he became the way he is... they would make a wonderful read. I'm very excited because I feel the genre I'm looking for does exist here."

"If I have this deep curiosity about China, I hope some readers in the west will share it with me."

Seeking middle ground in no-man's-land

Samir El-youssef's novel speaks from experience on the Middle East, but it's no war of words, writes Matthew Reisz

Samir El-youssef's living room is full of books - Arabic on one side, English on the other. Asked to define himself, he hesitates, then suggests that "it's a question of loyalty in two dimensions - I'm a citizen-exile or citizen-refugee".

Born a refugee in a Palestinian camp in Lebanon, El-youssef moved to London in 1990, acquired British citizenship in 2000, and has made a life as a writer and peace activist. His first English novel, *The Illusion of Return* (Halbin, HK\$179), is an exploration of issues of identity.

El-youssef's father is Sunni, but his mother comes from the only Shi'ite family in Palestine. This, he says, "has contributed to the diversity of my understanding of things. From the beginning you're aware of yourself as someone different". He has contributed many articles to London-based Arabic newspaper *Al-Hayat*, but his criticisms of the second intifada and the Arab policy of "normalisation" in relation to Israel have proved too controversial for publication.

"We have to meet the Israelis and have a dialogue," he says. "The idea of not meeting is simply childish and stupid. But it's not easy to express your views. You can be branded a Zionist or a traitor simply for not parroting the same old slogans."

El-youssef is effusive and hospitable, but the story of his early life is bleak. His family left the camp for a Shi'ite village when they scraped together enough money for a property. They lived through the Israeli occupation, but in the so-called "war of the camps" in 1986 the Amal Shi'ite militia targeted Palestinians. The family moved to the Sunni city of Sidon. Life there was comparatively safe, but the country was collapsing and Palestinians were at the bottom of the heap. "Lebanon in the 80s was awful - a state of nature with everybody at the throats of everybody else. To be a Palestinian at the end of the decade was hopeless. The Palestine Liberation Organisation was shattered; there was a lot of corruption."

For those in the camps, there was an additional malaise: they had long been at the forefront of the so-called Palestinian national revolution, but the first intifada (1987-90) in the West Bank and Gaza shifted the centre of gravity.

Despite the posturing and violence, "there had been a sense of doing something, of facing up to a challenge", El-youssef says. "But now things were happening somewhere else. Suddenly, we were left with militias, armed factions and political organisations with ridiculous or bankrupt agendas

in addition to poverty, lack of services, lack of everything." El-youssef left for Cyprus, then moved to England to work on a Kuwaiti-backed magazine - a project that fell through when Saddam Hussein carried out "an invasion against my interests". It is this moment he revisits in *The Day the Beast Got Thirsty*, a novella published in *Gaza Blues* (David Paul, HK\$144) alongside 15 enigmatic stories by his friend, Israeli writer Etgar Keret.

glued to the walls of the camp, declaring them as heroic martyrs who have died while fighting the Zionist enemy... After that, Israel could invade Lebanon again, destroy the camp and f*** us all up, so we die and get the hell out of this f***ing life."

Such ferocious black humour gives a picture of life far more real than the images of noble suffering.

"What you read in *The Beast* is what people said in the street

He has some sharp words about Palestinians' continuing refugee status within Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. "How can you be a refugee if you've been a teacher for 25 years earning a good salary?"

If the issue of such refugees is complex, even more intractable is the so-called right of return. The opening section of the novel treats this farcically.

El-youssef extracts a good deal of comedy from a narrator overly attached to the phrase, "We must look at the notion of return as a symbolic value". Yet the issue is utterly serious.

Deeply pessimistic about the current Middle East, for now he wants to address "the human issue of those living in refugee camps" without overlooking the question of why they're still refugees. And he says there's a need to look more carefully at the notion of return. "To what can we return? A piece of land? To places we have never been or which have changed beyond recognition?"

"The idea that every single person whose parents came from Palestine should have an automatic right of return is ridiculous. People who make that claim don't give a toss about the refugees, whether Palestinians live or die. They just want to continue the war with Israel."

"I don't believe in the right of return," he says. "And I don't want to return. But I do want an acknowledgement from the Israelis that I don't come from nowhere. It's a question of honour and dignity." *The Independent*



The Beast takes place in a refugee camp, where the young narrator lives amid fighters, racketeers, sloganeers and "fixers who sold you visas that took you nowhere". Exhausted, numb, frequently stoned and bored with all the talk of "our just cause", he ends up wondering about life with Dalal, a woman he doesn't even like: "We will get married and have 10 children, but then they will die, and have their photos

all the time - the jokes about Yasser Arafat, the PLO and the revolution; the selfishness; the cynicism accompanied by frankness. But all this has failed to be reflected in literature."

The Illusion of Return continues this examination, looking back to a Lebanese city under Israeli occupation in 1982 or 1983.

In 1948, El-youssef's parents were expelled from a village in Palestine that no longer exists.