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City stars in its own story

**FICTION**

**THE ARCHITECT'S APPRENTICE**

By Elif Shafak  
VIKING £14.99

REVIEWED BY DOUG JOHNSTONE



When an author beautifully evokes a sense of place in a novel, it's something of a cliché to describe that setting as almost a character in its own right. But there really is no other way to talk about Istanbul in this sumptuous piece of historical fiction from the famous Turkish writer Elif Shafak, the plot and characters being so carefully and intricately intertwined with the very existence of the city that shapes them.

It is the 16th century and Istanbul is the centre of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan holding sway over everyone from the grandest of lords to the lowliest of beggars. Into this maelstrom and chaos comes Jahan, a naive Indian boy who brings the exotic gift of a white elephant to the Sultan's menagerie.

Jahan becomes the elephant's mahout or tamer, and the animal quickly curries favour in the Sultan's court, being used for everything from street entertainment to battles. At the same time, Jahan becomes apprenticed to Sinan, the real-life chief royal architect, and begins to learn the secrets of building design and construction.

Sinan's life was extraordinary, spanning the rule of three sultans, responsible for hundreds of buildings and for shaping the face of Istanbul even to this day, and he was considered on a par with Michelangelo in the West.

Jahan slowly rises up through the ranks, and his presence in the royal court brings him into contact with the beautiful, caring and smart Princess Mihrimah, providing a sadly unfulfilled romance that traces a melancholic path through most of *The Architect's Apprentice*.

There are various other plot strands of courtly intrigue, treachery and even murder weaving through the book and driving things along, although there are moments when things happen a little too coincidentally and conveniently to be credible.

But throughout it all the city is the real star, the teeming bustle of the streets, the whores and palaces, the markets and mosques, the dungeons and bridges. And as the narrative progresses, the work of Sinan, Jahan, and Chota the elephant begins to take on greater meaning, the constant construction and destruction, the endless reinvention and renewal, acting as powerful metaphors.

At one point Jahan realises that the secret of his master's success lies not in toughness or indestructibility, "but in his ability to adapt to change and calamity, and to rebuild himself, again and again, out of the ruins". It's this kind of depth and breadth of scope that makes *The Architect's Apprentice* an absorbing and moving piece of work.

**PAPERBACKS**

REVIEWED BY LESLEY McDOWELL

**QUATERMASS AND THE PIT**

BY KIM NEWMAN  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN £12.99



The literary influences of MR James, H G Wells, and H P Lovecraft can all be detected in Nigel Kneale's Quatermass series, argues Kim Newman in this enjoyable, informative, and often surprising study. And in *Quatermass and the Pit* we can detect, particularly, the impact of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford's novel about "alien infiltration", *The Inheritors*. Is that literary aspect the main reason that "for over 60 years, British science fiction TV has been in the shadow of Quatermass"?

Newman develops his argument not by dismissing genre fiction in favour of literary, but he does stress the metaphorical aspects of the story: the "pit" is both a literal pit - where are found ape skeletons and alien skeletons lying together - as well as a figurative one, "the bottomless pit of Hell". BBC television's *Quatermass* series stressed the ordinary lives of real people; although the Hammer take-over later on meant a greater emphasis on horror, still the "sense of being populated by real people" was important and new.



Newman: Sees something deeper in the pit

*Quatermass and the Pit* was frightening because it implied that we were all descended partly from aliens, in this case Martians, a Darwinian nightmare. But while writers such as Wells and, by extension Kneale himself, could be accused of being reactionary in the face of advancing technology in a godless world, its innovative use, too, of the London Tube as a setting, and Kneale's excitement over "ideas", probably combined to make it an iconic story.

Tapping into our deepest fears about our past, as well as our terrors over the future, it took the "boffin" figure of the scientist and made him a kind of everyman. Newman more than justifies his interest in this film, which has probably too often been dismissed as confined by genre, commercial, and without depth. It is not quite so simple.

**LARKSWOOD**

BY VALERIE MENDES  
ORION £7.99



Historical romance is tricky to get right, and although Mendes has a juicy enough story on her hands, with the double time-frame of grandfather Edward's summer of 1896, and his grand-daughter Louisa's narrative of 1939, there's a tendency towards explanation here, which robs the prose of much tension. In Louisa, too, we have a charming but surprisingly invulnerable heroine. The greatest romance heroines are treated with a touch of sadism by their creators. Louisa is never really in jeopardy as she becomes curious about her grandfather's two sisters, who supposedly died when young. In Edward's narrative, we learn how one sister, Cynthia, had a baby out of wedlock, and of her parents' horrified and horrifying response to it. But, somehow, everyone feels that little bit too safe, their stories are that little bit too easily explained. Mendes is an experienced writer for young adults, but innocence needs to be punctured here, and that never quite happens, despite the revelations of Edward's past.

**HALF THE KINGDOM**

BY LORE SEGAL  
MELVILLE HOUSE £9.99



Segal's look at Alzheimer's is a dark comedy where older people in New York are found to be succumbing to a sudden and inexplicable strain of senility. Her leading characters are Joe and Jenny, a couple who run a small publishing company in Manhattan, and Lucy, a friend who works for them. When one of the sisters who sold the premises to Joe, where his publishing company now resides, kills herself by jumping off the roof of the building, Lucy's fears about something bigger than them all, and more deadly, are realised. But Segal grounds her premise in the most real and authentic detail, exposing the impatience and self-interest of families, as they try to discover what is going wrong.

**A BOOK OF VOYAGES**

EDITED BY PATRICK O'BRIAN  
HARPER £8.99



The British obsession with clean sheets while travelling abroad isn't the only concern expressed in this history of great travellers' accounts, first published in 1947. According to Philip Thicknesse while travelling in the 18th century, one must never ask a Frenchman his age, and make sure there are no holes behind pictures in a room, through which a stranger may crawl. We also learn about journeys that ended in cannibalism, as it did for the crew of the Irish ship the *Anne and Mary* in 1759. But there are some beautiful descriptions, too, such as that of the "Nabob's Lady" with her blackened teeth, her face "frosted" in gold leaf, and her "fillet of diamonds round her head". There can have been few more incredible human sights.

**THE LOST LANGUAGE OF CRANES**

BY DAVID LEAVITT  
BLOOMSBURY £8.99



In the 1997 preface to this novel, first published in 1986, Leavitt recalls how his second novel was initially seen as a disappointment after the success of his first. Eleven years after its publication, and several books later, Leavitt seemed surprised but pleased to find it was his best-known work. Almost 30 years after that publication date, its central tale of Owen and Rose, a middle-aged New York couple who find they may be evicted from their much-loved apartment, just as they try to accept their son's coming-out and Owen's own hidden homosexuality, is still fresh, even though the times have moved on. Leavitt is right in his preface to say that his characters still feel "alive today", for indeed they do.

**NEXT WEEK**

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