

"Stone's Fall" (Iain Pears) **Spoiler Alert!**

Strongly recommended. I've been a big fan of Iain Pears since reading *An Instance of the Fingerpost*. Stone's Fall is comparably good. I've read them both twice now.

The book is in three parts, set in different times, going successively back to an earlier period. Each is narrated by a different character. Both the differing perspectives of the changing narrators and the shift to earlier times allow the successive parts to shed light on the people and events of the preceding parts. The third part therefore ties much together that was left unexplained in the first two parts. There is a really great denouement, but you have to wait to the last few pages to have the twist revealed. Despite the 600 pages it's worth the wait.

Having said that the first two parts stand up well on their own. The genre, I suppose, is "mystery". (The book cover bears the legend "love, murder, espionage". I'll go with that too). To say that the story is about an industrialist called Stone will give completely the wrong impression. At the opening of the story he is dead, apparently having carelessly fallen from his study window. Yeah, right. Stone himself therefore has no role in Part 1, and actually very little in Part 2, though at least in that part he is alive.

Part 1 has Stone's widow, Elizabeth, hiring a non-too-salubrious journalist, Braddock, to investigate a mysterious clause in Stone's will. He has left a large sum of money to "his child". The widow was surprised. As far as she knows, there is no child. Braddock is duly put on the case. He solves it not, but he does unearth embezzlement within Stone's Company and he does fall in love with the universally irresistible Elizabeth. Unfortunately she finds it necessary to shoot him, though not fatally, whilst protecting the Czar of Russia from a would-be anarchist assassin. It happens. Meanwhile the sinister Cort, a George Smiley figure, flits in and out of the action, mysteriously controlling events from afar.

Part 2 is the back story of said Cort and his 'training' as a secret agent (though, being British, no terminology so coarse is ever used). The training is accomplished by the cool, experienced, capable and deadly 'agent' Drennan. They part on mutually homicidal terms. Here we see the young Cort foil a plot by the dastardly Europeans to destroy good old Blighty by ruining our economy by bringing down the banking system. (Ridiculous, couldn't happen). Pretty good end-of-part mini-denouement in which it turns out that Stone has actually been guiding events from the start, thus outwitting everybody, Europeans and Cort alike. Oh yes, forgot to say - in this part we have Cort bumping into Elizabeth (under a different name) before she attains her later wealthy and socially elevated status. In fact, she's a street whore. Cort gives her the big break that sets her on the road to a successful career manipulating men into giving her shit loads of dosh. Shhh....don't tell Stone, he's in love with her too. Oops, just did. Also Cort manages to get the Russian secret service to bump off Drennan, who he believes is out to get him, which is a pity because Drennan was working for Stone and not a bad guy after all.

And so to Part 3, and now for something completely different. Finally we get Stone's story. At least, his early story. The events that gave *him* his big break. It's set in Venice, and very dark and threatening it is too. Pears often introduces a supernatural element into his stories, against all expectation. Here it is in the form of Cassanova.

Yes, the actual man himself, ostensibly 150 years old or thereabouts. Stone is not going to escape the curse put on him in Venice. The message is - no one leaves Venice. This aura of threat around the Venice period is crucial to the ultimate twist of the story. In Venice we find Cort senior, the younger Cort's father (who, in Part 2, figured only as a semi-deranged person who was incapable of parenting his son). Drennan is here too. So is Elizabeth's mother, but you don't know that yet...and in the last part we find out just how all the characters are related. We also discover that Drennan rescued Cort junior from a house fire as a baby - thus making the latter's later assassination of the former all the more unfortunate.

Great book. Read it.

Score: 90010