

The Second Sleep

Robert Harris

In the first sentence we are informed that the year is 1468. One is therefore properly appalled, when only a little way into the book, that reference is made to the Elizabethan era. How could such an accomplished author make such a glaring anachronism? Just a few sentences after that, plastic is mentioned...and now one's antennae respond as intended, as even the greatest fool could not be that silly.

The events related are unfolding in a post-apocalyptic future in England. Initially one is thrown, deliberately, because the conditions of life described do indeed conform to what would be expected in (our) 1468. But our technology-driven world came to an abrupt end just a few years beyond the present day (assuming you are reading this in the early 2020s). Mass death ensued. Those few who survived became profoundly religious, blaming the apocalypse on God's wrath at our sinfulness. The church and state were again one, and the year of the apocalypse was taken as 666, the number of the beast, and the start of a new calendar.

So, evidence of our culture, being some 802 years ago, has largely vanished apart from archaeological remains. But any interest in such remains ("antiquarianism") is now heretical and punishable by death in the church courts.

The story opens with our young hero, Fairfax, a newly ordained priest, journeying on horseback to conduct the funeral of a parish priest in an out-of-the-way country village. Shockingly, he discovers, in the dead priest's house, forbidden volumes of the minutes of the Society of Antiquaries, a strictly proscribed, criminal organisation. It would seem the old priest was a heretic.

Fairfax, keen to leave the village immediately after conducting the funeral service, finds he cannot do so because foul weather has caused a landslide to cover the road. Forced to remain, Fairfax finds himself drawn deeper and deeper into the mysteries hinted at in the forbidden volumes – which he has endangered his immortal soul by reading.

Eventually he is joined in his interest in 'antiquaries' by the local aristocrat, Lady Durston, and her would-be husband, the plain-speaking, proto-capitalist, mill owner, Hancock. Driven largely by the obsessional energy of the latter, all three become so deeply embroiled in unearthing what seems to promise great rewards that, ultimately, they are unable to extricate themselves.

A good holiday read. An intriguing premise, and nicely set-up, but the climax/denouement fails to do justice to the beginning.

6 out of 10.