

## ***Stone Mirror: A Novel of the Neolithic*** By Rob Swigart

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Archaeological fiction is nothing new; indeed, most bookshops have shelves groaning with stories set in the classical world, Mediaeval Europe or any other place or period that you care to mention. At first glance, *Stone Mirror: A Novel of the Neolithic* fits easily into this large body of non-academic, non-pedagogical fiction, whose main aim is to entertain. However, Swigart makes clear in his preface that his ambition is to “write fiction about archaeology that is scientifically accurate and contemporary enough for use as a textbook” (page 9). This is a serious undertaking for an author with no archaeological background. Swigart’s previous publications include one other volume of archaeological fiction, with a similar didactic aim, based on the Maya civilisation (Swigart 2005), as well as numerous non-archaeological works. He was previously employed as a research affiliate at the Institute of the Future, where he constructed fictional scenarios and stories based on realistic forecasts—a process he suggests was very similar to writing the past: “there is scant direct evidence and much context to consider; results are tentative, speculative, and subject to constant revision” (page 9).

The idea of archaeology as narrative, as storytelling, is at the root of how we, as archaeologists, construct our particular perspective on the past (Joyce 2002). In a sense, every archaeological publication is, or at least should be, an attempt to narrate the past, to imagine what was and what might have been. Indeed, the need for modern archaeologists to produce considered and believable evocations of the past, rather than stodgy, data-heavy tomes, has been recognised for some time (e.g. Hodder 1989). Serious attempts have been made to combine informed literary invention with more standard scholastic approaches (e.g. Edmonds

1995, Mithen 2003) but these represent a small minority of archaeological writing. Swigart has taken a step from the opposite end of the spectrum, moving an essentially imaginative work in an academic direction. This is a very unusual approach and one that could perhaps only be undertaken by an author operating outside the archaeological sphere. It has been suggested that archaeologists (with a few exceptions) have lost the nerve to construct new ways of telling archaeology (Drewett 2001); *Stone Mirror* may be an indication that others are taking up the mantle.

Swigart avoids many of the arguments over interpretation that can easily plague fictional reconstructions, by basing his story on an imaginary site in Turkey called Aynali Tepe; of course, this also reduces its usefulness as a potential textbook. The book is split into two complementary narratives, of which the first follows the development of a modern archaeological excavation on the site through the eyes of Saatchi, an anti-social excavator with a worrying obsession with soil. As the book develops, we move between Saatchi's world and a parallel story, centred around the same site some 8000 years previously. This is a more intimate story that follows the very human struggles faced by a family living in a settlement (Aynali Tepe) similar to the famous Neolithic settlement at Çatalhöyük. The two tales are cleverly intertwined; as artefacts and burials are excavated in the present we see them used and deposited in the past, connecting the abstract to the human in a very simple but effective way.

At the same time, while *Stone Mirror* is original, well-researched and well-written, it is not without flaws. The author's commendable intention that the volume be used as a textbook unfortunately leads to an irritating schizophrenia in parts of the book. This applies particularly to the modern story, where the flow of the narrative is frequently jarred by long passages of educational material. This is usually in the form of conversations between characters and is occasionally necessary. However, far too often, the detail cannot be sustained by the medium and the conversations feel artificial and contrived. Another drawback, confined again to the modern narrative, is the one-dimensional nature of a number of the characters. These range from the seemingly delusional Prof. Lena Marie Troye, obsessed with and devoted to the 'Mother Goddess', to a condescending portrayal of Özgür, the conniving self-interested local official

either incapable or unwilling to understand the goals of the archaeologists, whose motives are never challenged. In fact, throughout the book, there is an implicit and unquestioning acceptance that archaeology is the correct way to deal with and view the past and Swigart makes no attempt to address issues such as the destruction caused by excavation or the appropriation of heritage by international (i.e. Western) 'experts'.

The prehistoric narrative is also at times a little naïve in its uncritical acceptance of outdated concepts. The most obvious example is Swigart's reproduction of the romantic ideal of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle and his demonisation of the farmers in the story as "the real slaves...bound to the soil, the crop, the round of work" (page 163). Nonetheless, the prehistoric narrative is also the triumph of the book: it really does succeed in creating a plausible world, humanising the past without patronising the reader and, at the same time, tackling important themes (such as climate change, the move towards domesticated economies, inter-tribal conflict and the development of hierarchical systems) in a very subtle and effective way.

Overall, *Stone Mirror* is an excellent piece of archaeological fiction that certainly has the ability to educate. Nevertheless, it is not a textbook. Academic writing requires justification alongside interpretation and, while Swigart does provide a useful bibliography, the reader will always be left wondering what is based on fact and what is pure fabrication. It is clear that there is no space within fictional narrative for justification, qualification or in-text references but there was nothing to prevent Swigart including endnotes with discussion, explanation and appropriate citations; these would have significantly enhanced the academic value of the book.

The paperback volume is nicely presented, with a valuable glossary and attractive cover. Occasional spelling errors occur but they do not detract significantly from a book that can be recommended as an excellent introduction to archaeology for the public and new archaeology students, as well as an interesting and enjoyable illustration of how archaeology can be used to tell stories for those of us already active in the field.

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## References

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