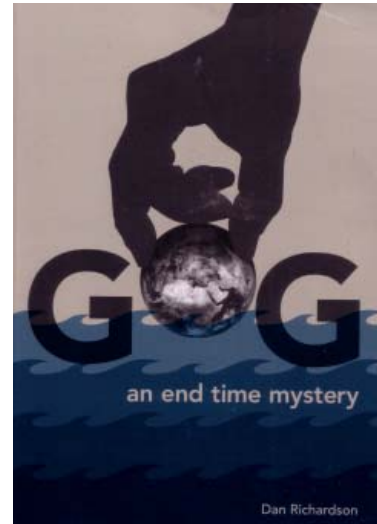


Simon TURMAINE

HIDDEN AGENDAS

Review of Dan Richardson's book
GOG — an End time Mystery



If Naomi Klein's controversial exposé of "disaster capitalism", *The Shock Doctrine*, had been conceived as a political thriller it might resemble *Gog — an End Time Mystery*. Both were published in 2009, six years after the invasion of Iraq and eight years into the "War on Terror". Both examine the brutal transformation of countries, driven by ideologues, ruthless geopolitics and self-interest.

Klein exhumes the "cold cases" of US-backed coups and military dictatorships in Chile, Argentina and Indonesia, before dissecting the application of "shock and awe" in Iraq and the hidden agenda of "humanitarian relief" in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina and Southeast Asia after the tsunami.

Gog — being fiction — is premised on a near-future scenario: terrorists have blown up Egypt's Aswan High Dam, unleashing a flood of unprecedented magnitude, which devastates the Nile Valley, killing sixty million Egyptians in a single day. All this occurs in a prologue; the story proper unfolds two years later, when disaster relief has given way to the slow task of reconstruction.

The flood has left vast tracts of desert as swamps and savannah. Cairo lies in ruins; Alexandria has vanished. With its ancient heartland destroyed, the nation-state has fragmented into disparate entities — some recognised by the United Nations, others not. Passing references to Baby Gaddafi and Wahhabi Arabia hint at other changes in the region — presumably one of Gaddafi's sons has succeeded him, and the House of Saud has fallen — but the focus remains on Egypt until the final chapters.

Gog could be described as an apocalyptic whodunit insofar as it adheres to the conventions of a murder mystery — but with its victims numbered in millions, and NGOs, corporations and intelligence agencies as suspects. Comparisons with John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* spring to mind, yet *Gog* is a darker vision of what lies behind the news headlines. If readers hostile to America or Israel find their prejudices confirmed by certain chapters, others will come as a slap in the face — while those whose sympathies lie in the opposite direction will relish them as a reality check, only to be offended by other passages.

Gog delights in mocking religions, ideologies and assumptions...

The central characters — Nick and Carina — are middle-class British liberals, caught in a stale marriage. Nick volunteers to audit the relief effort in Egypt, where he becomes enamoured of a Suez bargirl, Yasmina. His “quixotic urge to right wrongs” leads to his disappearance — whereupon Carina flies out to find him, to become embroiled in a chain of conspiracy stretching from the Giza Plateau to Dubai and far beyond. In a ravaged land where cynicism and expediency rule, their good intentions and worthy ideals are exposed as naïveté and complacency.

Conversely, the Egyptian characters have no illusions yet dream of a better life, if not the one they’d envisaged before the “Black Day”. Having once studied pharmacology and hoped to marry a doctor, Yasmina now inveigles foreigners to buy drinks at a sleazy club, but refuses to prostitute herself. Sabr once seduced foreign women on his *felucca* (like his father, the “Aswan Stallion”) and now drives for an aid agency — a job he’s loath to risk by helping Carina search for her missing husband. And then there is Tariq — a pre-pubescent scavenger who never realised his ambition to hustle tourists but knows the location of a hidden tomb, stuffed with treasure...

Events unfold at a cracking pace — with helicopter gunships, sandstorms, duplicitous evangelists and mullahs driving the action — but not so fast that you can’t savour the minor characters, each with their own back-story. While an odious

salvage-engineer gets his just deserts other villains go unpunished — even poetic justice is a rarity, the novel suggests. Ambiguity and disinformation are another matter. Layers of conspiracy and conflicting explanations keep you guessing right up until the end — and even when the final connection is made there’s room for different solutions to the mystery of Gog’s subtitle.

Along the way, readers will learn something of local slang (sexual references are couched in terms of pigeons, fruit, vegetables, or automobiles) and obscenities (there is a glossary at the back); how unhappy women seek solace in exorcisms, and other outré aspects of Egyptian culture. Observers of international politics will detect allusions to George W Bush and Donald Rumsfeld (some of whose utterances are purloined for the novel), as those versed in theology will recognise references to End-time eschatology in the Bible and the Qur’an.

All in all, *Gog* is an imaginative, unusual thriller, which exudes authenticity. The author is a veteran travel writer for the *Rough Guides* with twenty years’ experience of Egypt — where he “knows sex-hustlers, spies and tomb-robbers” — who once served as a volunteer aid worker in the Balkans. With such a checkered past to draw on, it’s no mystery that his first novel is so intriguing.

Gog — an End Time Mystery, by Dan Richardson, published by Avantoure UK in a range of digital formats and as a print-on-demand paperback. For more details, visit <http://gogbook.wordpress.com/>. ■