

The Murder of King Tut by James Patterson

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As an Egyptologist this is probably the worst book for me to read with any attempt at objectivity. In his introduction Patterson emphasised the importance of research in this novel and how "the facts" were key and were used for the basis of the story. This immediately led me to wonder on the title; as in 2005 the CT scan of Tutankhamun's mummy shows he was not murdered, but rather died of an accident. Patterson half way through the book, dismisses the work of these archaeological scholars in a couple of paragraphs as something not to be trusted.

However by the end of the first chapter I knew that facts were not necessarily important to Patterson's story, as the research was clearly shoddy and out of date, and therefore his version of events was clearly fictional.

In a rather contrived opening dialogue between Patterson and his editor he claimed he had an "hunch" that Tutankhamun was murdered and he intended to prove it. This is not however, a new theory; it is at least 60 years old now. Things were to get worse; with the first introduction to the ancient Egyptians were Nubian slaves building the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. It is a known FACT that the people who worked in the Valley of the Kings were not slaves but upper middle class workmen who lived in the village of Deir el Medina.

This progressed with the royal harem of Amenhotep (and later Ay's) appears to be filled with common whores, whereas in reality they were royal wives, and as a layman Ay would not have had a harem. According to Patterson Pharaohs were buried at Beni Hasan; the kings of the Middle Kingdom would not be impressed at this as the tombs are those of Nomarchs or Mayors. By this point I was only on page 35 and figured I needed to change my approach to reading this novel.

The review would get very tedious if I pointed out every inaccuracy, especially in the quantity they had been appearing so far, so I realised I would have to try and simply read this as a murder mystery and try to forget every piece of information I know about Egyptology. A difficult task for someone who has written a biography of both Tutankhamun and Horemheb, But I was prepared to give it a go. So did this approach improve the novel? The simple answer is yes, a great deal, although the novel is in itself mediocre.

It is separated into three stories which have interchanging chapters; the story of Tutankhamun and his reign (14th century BC), the story of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter (turn of the 20th century) and the story of James Patterson and his editor (modern day). The connections between reading about Tutankhamun in his palace in one chapter, and then

being plunged into Carter's world in the next, was not apparently clear and at times this was a little disorientating.

I have to say the story of Tutankhamun was better than the other two aspects, and the overall novel would have been better if he had focused on this murder mystery, which is what he does best. Despite the inconsistencies, and inaccuracies it was a relatively fast-paced murder-mystery, although the ideas are not new and it was like reading any one of a dozen stories about Tutankhamun. However there were some interesting scenes, and you feel that you have entered palace life in ancient Egypt (albeit ancient Egypt of Patterson's imagination), as well as the minds of some of the key players such as Nefertiti and Tutankhamun himself. I would have liked more of this aspect of the story with character stories and personalities being developed further, but where this was lacking it was written well enough that my imagination could take over.

The second story-thread of Howard Carter, came across as not being sure what it was; a fictional reconstruction of his archaeological life, or a factual biography. It seemed to flit between the two and was a much better read when it was the fictional aspect with dialogue and activity. The biographical aspects of this element of the novel were weak and have been done in far more articulate and accurate ways elsewhere. This aspect follows Carter's career from 1900 through the discovery of the tomb, the disappointments and excitements, as well as the arguments and problems encountered by Carter on his journey. His diaries were obviously used although rather than cleverly working these diaries into a dialogue and story-line, excerpts were quoted, often with the statement "as he was to later record", which added to the confusion as to whether this was meant to be an historical novel or biography.

The weakest part of the novel were the snippets of self-congratulatory conversations between Patterson and his editor or wife, where he boldly brings up a media quote that he is "the man that can't miss" and that as he has written fictional crime novels for a number of years he will solve this mystery of the murder that has alluded Egyptologists for decades. I felt these were incredibly bold statements for someone whose research had such fundamental flaws in it, and he seemed almost excited that his researcher (he didn't do the research himself) had been to Cairo and Luxor as part of the research. I can't help but think that picking up a decent book on Carter or Tutankhamun would have been a better use of his time and would have cleared up some of the larger errors in his research.

Patterson clearly has a talent as a fictional writer, and this is where he is let down in this novel as he is trying to write in a style he is not accustomed to. The historical story of Tutankhamun is a good one, and he did this well, but I know he could have done a better and more thorough job if he wasn't trying to write outside of his genre. Even the Carter aspect of the story was let down

with the semi-biographical writing attempt, as when he fictionalised certain aspects of the story, it was better and incredibly readable. I suppose this is the redeeming feature of this book, is its readability. It isn't a great book, and the historical facts are incorrect, but it is an ideal way of filling a day on a beach holiday or a long train journey (as in my case). It is a typical holiday read, one to get from the library rather than pay the £6.99 cover price. Spend the money on one of Patterson's other novels which are the reason he is famous.