

Stone's Fall by Iain Pears.

Jonathan Cape 2009.

This is the first of Iain Pears' books that I have read and within a few pages of starting it I was asking myself how on earth a writer of this quality, whose first novel was published in 1990, had eluded me completely. By the time I had finished I was committed to reading everything that he had written on the grounds that writers of such exuberant quality and creativity are all too rare and must be cherished.

Stone's Fall tells the story of a Victorian businessman, the eponymous Stone, whose life spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and whose fabulous wealth, enormous power and influence fails to save him from a mysterious and fatal fall from a window at his London home.

Intriguingly, Iain Pears tells Stone's story in three different ways: first, through the investigation into his death by a young journalist called Matthew Braddock who is charged by Stone's widow, the magnificent and mysterious Elizabeth, with investigating his death; second through the memoir of the sinister and highly manipulative civil servant Henry Cort, and finally through the memoir of John Stone himself. The three sections are headed – London 1909, Paris 1890 and Venice 1867.

At each stage of the story Pears draws the reader in, empathising and warming to some characters and loathing and deploring others, and the atmosphere that is engendered by the writing is powerful and seductive. Stone's Fall is fiction of the highest quality and intelligence and one of those rare books that grabs hold of you tightly within a few lines and only releases you reluctantly on the final page.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh